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WILL SHAKESPEARE

CLEMENCE DANE

1º [illegible] English [illegible]
2º Shake[illegible]
[illegible]

1. Drama, English
2. Shakespeare, [illegible]

WILL SHAKESPEARE

AN INVENTION

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS:

REGIMENT OF WOMEN
FIRST THE BLADE
LEGEND

PLAY:

A BILL OF DIVORCEMENT

WILL SHAKESPEARE

AN INVENTION IN FOUR ACTS

BY

CLEMENCE DANE, pseud of...

c Ashton, Winifred 1

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1922

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"There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will."

SHAKESPEARE.

27X445

THE PEOPLE OF THE PLAY

As they appear.

ANNE HATHAWAY.
WILL SHAKESPEARE.
MRS. HATHAWAY.
HENSLOWE.
A CHILD.
PLAYERS.
QUEEN ELIZABETH.
MARY FITTON.
KIT MARLOWE.
STAGE HANDS.
A BOY.
A LANDLORD.
A MAN.
ANOTHER MAN.
A GIRL.
A STREET HAWKER.
A PAGE.
SOLDIERS, ATTENDANTS, ETC.

ACT I.—A COTTAGE IN STRATFORD.

ACT II.—TEN YEARS LATER—*Scene* 1. A ROOM IN THE PALACE. *Scene* 2. THREE MONTHS LATER—THE FIRST NIGHT OF "ROMEO AND JULIET."

ACT III.—*Scene* 1. A MONTH LATER—SHAKESPEARE'S LODGING. *Scene* 2. THE SAME NIGHT—A ROOM AT AN INN.

ACT IV.—THE NEXT DAY—A STATE ROOM IN THE PALACE.

The Play was first acted at the Shaftesbury Theatre, London, on November 17th, 1921, by the Reandean Company, with the following cast:—

WILL SHAKESPEARE	Mr. Philip Merivale
ANNE	Miss Moyna Macgill
MRS. HATHAWAY	Miss Mary Rorke
HENSLOWE	Mr. Arthur Whitby
QUEEN ELIZABETH	Miss Haidee Wright
MARY FITTON	Miss Mary Clare
KIT MARLOWE	Mr. Claude Rains
A CHILD ACTOR	Master Eric Spear
A SECRETARY	Mr. Arthur Bawtree
A STAGE HAND	Mr. Gilbert Ritchie
A BOY	Master Spear
A LANDLORD	Mr. Ivor Barnard
A LADY-IN-WAITING	Miss Joan Maclean

Shadows in Act I.

OPHELIA	Miss Lennie Pride	SHYLOCK	Mr. Gilbert Ritchie
DESDEMONA	Miss Gladys Jessel	CLOWN	Mr. Ivor Barnard
OTHELLO	Mr. Herbert Young	HAMLET	Mr. Neil Curtis
QUEEN MARGARET	Miss Flora Robson	CAESAR	Mr. Arthur Bawtree
PRINCE ARTHUR	Mr. Eric Crosbie	CLEOPATRA	Miss Mai Ashley
ROSALIND	Miss Phyllis Fabian	KING LEAR	Mr. Fred Morgan

THE THREE FATES { Miss Nora Robinson, Miss Gladys Gray, Miss Beatrice Smith }

Strolling Players, Beefeaters, Stage Hands, Drinkers, Court Attendants, etc.

The Production by BASIL DEAN.

The Music by THOMAS WOOD.

Designs for the Scenery and Dresses by GEORGE HARRIS.

ACT I

The curtain rises on the living room of a sixteenth century cottage. The walls and ceiling are of black beams and white-washed plaster. On the left is a large open fireplace with logs burning. Beyond it is a door. At the back is another door and a mullioned window half open giving a glimpse of bare garden hedge and winter sky. On the right wall is a staircase running down from the ceiling into the room, a dresser and a light shelf holding a book or two. Under the shelf is a small table piled with papers, ink-stand, sand box and so on. At it sits Shakespeare, his elbows on his papers, his head in his hands, absorbed. He is a boy of twenty but looks older. He is dark and slight. His voice is low, but he speaks very clearly. Behind him Anne Hathaway moves to and fro from dresser to the central table, laying a meal. She is a slender, pale woman with reddish hair. Her movements are quick and furtive and she has a high sweet voice that shrills too easily.

ANNE

[*Hesitating, with little pauses between the sentences.*]
Supper is ready, Will! Will, did you hear?
A farm-bird—Mother brought it. Won't you come?
She's crying in for the basket presently.
First primroses! Here, smell! Sweet, aren't they?
Bread?

Are the snow wreaths gone from the fields? Did you go far?

Are you wet? Was it cold? There's black frost in the air,

My mother says, and spring hangs dead on the boughs—

Oh, you might answer when I speak to you!

[*Shakespeare gets up quickly.*]

Where are you going?

SHAKESPEARE

Out!

ANNE

Where?

SHAKESPEARE

Anywhere—

ANNE

—away from me! Yes! Say it!

SHAKESPEARE

[*Under his breath.*]

Patience! Patience!

ANNE

Come back! Come back! I'm sorry. Oh, come back!

I talk too much. I crossed you. You must eat.

Oh! Oh! I meant no harm—I meant no harm!—

You know?

SHAKESPEARE

I know.

ANNE

Why then, come back and eat,

And talk to me. Aren't you a boy to lose
All day in the woods?

SHAKESPEARE

The town!

ANNE

Ah! In the town?
Ah then, you've talked and eaten. Yes, you can talk
In the town!

[*He goes back to his desk.*]

More writing? What's the dream to-day?

[*He winces.*]

Oh, tell me, tell me!

SHAKESPEARE

No!

ANNE

I want your dreams.

SHAKESPEARE

A dream's a bubble, Anne, and yet a world,
Unsailed, uncharted, mine. But stretch your hand
To touch it—gone! And you have wet your fingers,
Whilst I, like Alexander, want my world—
And so I scold my wife.

ANNE

Oh, let me sail
Your world with you.

SHAKESPEARE

One day, when all is mapped
On paper—

ANNE

Now!

SHAKESPEARE

Not yet.

ANNE

Now, now!

SHAKESPEARE

I cannot!

ANNE

Because you will not. Ever you shut me out.

SHAKESPEARE

How many are there in the listening room?

ANNE

We two.

SHAKESPEARE

We three.

ANNE

Will!

SHAKESPEARE

Are there not three? Yet swift,
Because it is too soon, you shrink from me,
Guarding your mystery still; so must I guard
My dreams from any touch till they are born.

ANNE

What! Do you make our bond our barrier now?

SHAKESPEARE

See, you're a child that clamours—"Let me taste!"
But laugh and let it sip your wine, it cries—
"I like it not. It is not sweet!"—and blames you.
See! even when I give you cannot take.

ANNE

Try me!

SHAKESPEARE

Too late.

ANNE

I will not think I know
What cruelty you mean. What is't you mean?
What is't?

SHAKESPEARE

How long since we two married?

ANNE

Why,
Four months.

SHAKESPEARE

And are you happy?

ANNE

Will, aren't you?

SHAKESPEARE

I asked my wife.

ANNE

I am! I am! I am!
Oh, how can I be happy when I read
Your eyes, and read—what is it that I read?

SHAKESPEARE

God knows!

ANNE

Yes, God He knows, but He's so far away—
Tell Anne!

SHAKESPEARE

Touch not these cellar thoughts, half worm, half
weed:

Give them no light, no air: be warned in time:
Break not the seal nor roll away the stone,
Lest the blind evil writhe itself heart-high
And its breath stale us!

ANNE

Oh, what evil?

SHAKESPEARE

Know you not?
Why then I'll say "Thank God!" and never tell you—
And yet I think you know?

ANNE

Am I, your wife,
Wiser than your own mother in your ways
(For she was wise for many, I've but you)
Ways in my heart stored, and with them the unborn
I feed, that he may grow a second you—
Am I your wife, so close to you all day,
So close to you all night, that oft I lie
Counting your heart-beats—do I watch you stir
And cry out suddenly and clench your hand
Till the bone shows white, and then you sigh and turn,
And sometimes smile, but never ope your eyes,
Nor know me with a seeking touch of hands
That bids me share the dream—am I your wife,
Can I be woman and your very wife
And know not you are burdened? You lock me out,
Yet at the door I wait, wringing my hands
To help you.

SHAKESPEARE

You could help me; but—I know you!
You'd help me, in your way, to go—your way!

ANNE

The right way.

SHAKESPEARE

Said I not, sweetheart—your way?
So—leave it!

[*He begins to write. Anne goes to the window and leans against it, looking out.*]

ANNE

[*Softly.*]

Give me words! God, give me words!

SHAKESPEARE

Sweetheart, you stay the light.

ANNE

The pane is cool.

[*She moves to one side.*]

Can you see now?

SHAKESPEARE

That's better.

[*The twang of a lute is heard.*]

ANNE

The road dances.

A VOICE

[*Singing.*]

Come with me to London,
Folly, come away!
I'll make your fortune
On a fine day—

ANNE

A stranger with my mother at the gate!

[*She opens the door to Mrs. Hathaway, who enters.*]

THE VOICE

[*Nearer.*]

Daisy leave and buttercup!
Pick your gold and silver up,
In London, in London,
Oh, London Town!

ANNE

What have you brought us, Mother, unawares?

MRS. HATHAWAY

Why, I met the man in the lane and he asked his way here. He wants Will.

ANNE

Does he, and does he?

SHAKESPEARE

[*At the window.*]

One of the players. In the town I met him
And had some talk, and told him of my play.

ANNE

You told a stranger and a player? But I—
I am not told!

THE VOICE

[*Close at hand.*]

For sheep can feed
And robins breed
Without you, without you,
And the world get on without you—
Oh, London Town!

[*Shakespeare goes to the door.*]

ANNE

[*Stopping him.*]

What brings him here?

SHAKESPEARE

I bring him!
To my own house.

[*He goes out.*]

MRS. HATHAWAY

Trouble?

ANNE

Why, no! No trouble!
I am not beaten, starved, nor put on the street.

MRS. HATHAWAY

Be wise, be wise; for the child's sake, be wiser!

ANNE

What shall I do? Out of your fifty years,
What shall I do to hold him?

MRS. HATHAWAY

A low voice
And a light heart is best—and not to judge.

ANNE

Light, Mother, light? Oh, Mother, Mother, Mother!
I'm battling on the crumble-edge of loss
Against a seaward wind, that drives his ship
To fortunate isles, but carries me cliff over,
Clutching at flint and thistle-hold, to braise me
Upon the barren beaches he has left
For ever.

[*Shakespeare and the player, Henslowe, come in talking.*]

MRS. HATHAWAY

[*At the inner door.*]

Come, find my basket for me. Let them be!

ANNE

Look at him, how his face lights up!

MRS. HATHAWAY

Come now,
And leave them to it!

ANNE

I dare not, Mother, I dare not.

MRS. HATHAWAY

It's not the way—a little trust—

ANNE

I dare not.

[*Mrs. Hathaway goes out at the door by the fire.*]

HENSLOWE

[*In talk. He is a stout, good-humoured, elderly man, with bright eyes and a dancing step. He wears ear-rings, is dressed shabby-handsome, and is splashed with mud. A lute is slung at his shoulder.*]

Played? It shall be played. That's why I'm here.

ANNE

[*Behind them.*]

Will!

SHAKESPEARE

[*Turning.*]

This is my wife.

ANNE

[*Curtseys. Then, half aside.*]

Who is the man? Where from? What is his name?

HENSLOWE

[*Overhearing.*]

Proteus, Madonna! A poor son of the god.

[*Shakespeare laughs.*]

ANNE

A foreigner?

HENSLOWE

Why, yes and no! I'm from Spain at the moment—I have castles there; but my bed-sitting room (a green room, Madonna) is in Blackfriars. As to my means, for I see your eye on my travel stains, I have a bank account, also in Spain, a box office, and the best of references. The world and his wife employ me, the Queen comes to see me, and all the men of genius run to be my servants. But as to who I am—O Madonna, who am I not? I've played every card in the pack, beginning as the least in the company, the mere unit, the innocent ace, running up my number with each change of hand to Jack, Queen, King, and so to myself again, the same mere One, but grown to my hopes. For Queen may blow kisses, King of Hearts command all hands at court, but Ace in his shirt-sleeves is manager and trumps them off the board at will. You may learn from this Ace; for I think, sir, you will end as he does, the master of your suit.

ANNE

A fortune-teller too!

HENSLOWE

Will you cross my palm with a sixpence, Madonna?

ANNE

With nothing.

HENSLOWE

Beware lest I tell you for nothing that you—fear your fortune!

SHAKESPEARE

[*Spreading his hand.*]

Is mine worth fearing?

HENSLOWE

Here's an actor's hand, and a bad one. You'll lose your words, King o' Hearts. Your great scene will break down.

SHAKESPEARE

Then I'll be 'prenticed direct to the Ace.

HENSLOWE

Too fast. You must come to cues like the rest of us, and play out your part, before you can be God Almighty in the wings—as God himself found out when the world was youngish.

ANNE

We're plain people, sir, and my husband works his farm.

HENSLOWE

And sings songs? I've been trying out a new play in the provinces before we risk London and Gloriana—

ANNE

What! the Queen! the Queen?

HENSLOWE

Oh, she keeps her eye on poor players as well as

on Burleigh and the fleet. *There's* God Almighty in the wings if you like! But as I say—

Whatever barn we storm, here in the west,
We're marching to the echo of new songs,
Jigged out in taverns, trolled along the street,
Loosed under sweetheart windows, whistled and sighed
Wherever a farmer's boy in Lover's Lane
Shifts from the right foot to the left and waits—
"Where did you hear it?" say I, beating time:
And always comes the answer—"Stratford way!"
A green parish, Stratford!

SHAKESPEARE

Too flat, though I love it. Give me hills to climb!

HENSLOWE

Flat? You should see Norfolk, where I was a boy. From sky to sky there's no break in the levels but shock-head willows and reed tussocks where a singing bird may nest. But in which? Oh, for that you must sit unstirring in your boat, between still water and still sky, while the drips run off your blade until a yard away, uprises the song. Then, flash! part the rushes—the nest is bare and the bird your own! Oh, I know the ways of the water birds! And so, hearing of a cygnet on the banks of Avon—

ANNE

Ah!

HENSLOWE

You're right, Madonna, the poetical vein runs dry. So I'll end with a plain question—"Is not Thames broader than Avon?"

SHAKESPEARE

Muddier—

HENSLOWE

But a magical water to hasten the moult, to wash white a young swan's feathers.

SHAKESPEARE

Or black, Mephisto!

HENSLOWE

Black swans are rarest. I saw one when I was last in London. London's a great city! Madonna, you should send your husband to market in London, and in a twelvemonth he'll bring you home the world in his pocket as it might be a russet apple.

ANNE

What should we do with the world, sir, here in Stratford?

HENSLOWE

Why, seed it and sow it, and plant it in your garden, and it'll grow into the tree of knowledge.

ANNE

[*Turning away.*]

My garden is planted already.

HENSLOWE

[*In a low voice.*]

The black swan seeks a mate, black swan.

SHAKESPEARE

A woman?

ANNE

[*Turning sharply.*]

What did he say to you?

HENSLOWE

Why, that a woman can make her fortune in London as well as a man. There's one came lately to court, but sixteen and a mere knight's daughter, without a penny piece, and you should see her now! The men at her feet—

ANNE

And the women—?

HENSLOWE

Under her heel.

ANNE

What does the Queen say?

HENSLOWE

Winks and lets her be.
A fashion out of fashion—gipsy-black
Among the ladies with their bracken hair,
(The Queen, you know, is red!)

SHAKESPEARE

A vixen, eh?

HENSLOWE

Treason, my son!

ANNE

God made us anyway and coloured us!

SHAKESPEARE

And is he less the artist if at will
He strings a black pearl, hangs between the camps
Of day and day the banner of His dark?
Or that He leaves, when with His autumn breath
He fans the bonfire of the woods, a pine
Unkindled?

HENSLOWE

True; and such a black is she
Among the golden women.

SHAKESPEARE

I see your pine,
Your branching solitude, your evening tree,
With high, untroubled head, that meets the eye
As lips meet unseen kisses in the night—
A perfumed dusk, a canopy of dreams
And chapel of ease, a harp for summer airs
To tremble in—

ANNE

Barren the ground beneath,
No flowers, no grass, the needles lying thick,
Spent arrows—

SHAKESPEARE

Yes, she knows—we know how women
Can prick a man to death with needle stabs.

ANNE

O God!

HENSLOWE

Your wife! She's ill!

SHAKESPEARE

Anne?

ANNE

Let me be!

SHAKESPEARE

Come to your mother—take my arm—

ANNE

I'll sit.
I have no strength.

SHAKESPEARE

I'll call her to you.

[*He goes out.*]

ANNE

Quick!
Before he comes, what is her name? her name?
Her mood? her mind? In all the town of Stratford
Was there no door but this to pound at? Quick!
You know her? Did you see his look? O God!
The last rope parts. He's like a boat that strains,
Strains at her moorings. Why did you praise her so?
And talk of London? What's it all to you?
Tall, is she? Yes, like a tree—a block of wood—
You said so! (Is he coming?) Tell me quick!
I've never seen a London lady close.
She's lovely? So are many! How?

HENSLOWE

She's new!
She's gallant, like a tall ship setting sail,
And boasts she fears no man. Say "woman" though—

ANNE

What woman does this woman fear?

HENSLOWE

The Queen.
I've seen it in her eye.

ANNE

I should not fear.

HENSLOWE

You never saw the Queen of England smile
And crook her finger, once—and the fate falls.

ANNE

I've seen her picture. She's eaten of a worm
As I am eaten. I'd not fear the Queen.
Her snake would know its fellow in my heart
And pass me. But this woman—what's her name?

HENSLOWE

Mary—

ANNE

That's "bitter." I shall find her so.

[*Shakespeare comes in with Mrs. Hathaway.*]

Look at him! Fear the Queen? Did not the Queen,
My sister, meet a Mary long ago
That bruised her in the heel?

HENSLOWE

Man, your wife's mad!
She says the Queen's her sister.

ANNE

Mad, noble Festus?
Not I! But tell him so—he'll kiss you for it.

HENSLOWE

I'll meet you, friend, some other time or place—

SHAKESPEARE

What's this? You're leaving us?

HENSLOWE

Your wife's too ill—

SHAKESPEARE

Too ill to stand, yet not too ill to— [*Aside.*] Anne!
Why does he stare? What have you told my friend?

ANNE

Your friend!

SHAKESPEARE

My friend!

ANNE

This once-met Londoner!
What does he want of you, in spite of me?
This bribing tramp, this palpable decoy—

SHAKESPEARE

Be silent in my house before my friends!
Be silent!

ANNE

This your friend!

SHAKESPEARE

Silent, I say!

ANNE

I *will* not! Blows? Would you do that to me,
Husband?

SHAKESPEARE

I never touched you!

ANNE

What! No blow?
Here, where I felt it—here? Is there no wound,
No black mark?

MRS. HATHAWAY

Oh, she's wild! I'll take her.
Come!
Come, Anne! It's naught! I know the signs.
[*To Shakespeare*]
Stay you!

ANNE

O Mother, there befell me a strange pang
Here at my heart—

[*The two go out together.*]

SHAKESPEARE

O women! women! women!
They slink about you, noiseless as a cat,
With ready smiles and ready silences.
These women are too humble and too wise
In pricking needle-ways: they drive you mad
With fibs and slips and kisses out of time:
And if you do not trip and feign as they
And cover all with kisses, do but wince
Once in your soul (the soul they shall not touch,
Never, I tell you, never! Sooner the smeared,
The old-time honey death from a thousand stings,
Than let their tongue prick patterns on your soul!)
Then, then all's cat-like clamour and annoy!

HENSLOWE

Cry, "Shoo!" and clap your hands; for so are all
Familiar women. These are but interludes
In the march of the play, and should be taken so,
Lightly, as food for laughter, not for rage.

SHAKESPEARE

My mother—

HENSLOWE

[*Shrugging.*]

Ah, your mother!

SHAKESPEARE

She's not thus,
But selfless; and I've dreamed of others—tall,
Warm-flushed like pine-woods with their clear red stems,
With massy hair and voices like the wind
Stirring the cool dark silence of the pines.
Know you such women?—beckoning hill-top women,
That sway to you with lovely gifts of shade
And slumber, and deep peace, and when at dawn
You go from them on pilgrimage again,
They follow not nor weep, but rooted stand
In their own pride for ever—demi-gods.
Are these such women? Did you say you knew
Such women? such a woman?

HENSLOWE

Come to London
And use your eyes!

SHAKESPEARE

How can I come to London?
You see me what I am, a man tied down.
My wife—you saw! How can I come to London?
Say to a sick man "Take your bed and walk!"
Say to a prisoner "Release your chain!"
Say to a tongue-slit blackbird "Pipe again
As in the free, the spring time!" You maybe
Have spells to help them, but for me no help.

London!
I think sometimes that I shall never see
This lady in whose lap the weed-hung ships
From ocean-end returning pour their gold,
Myrrh, frankincense. What colour's frankincense?
And how will a man's eye move and how his hand,
Who sailed the flat world round and home again
To London, London of the mazy streets,
Where ever the shifting people flash and fade
Like my own thoughts? You're smiling—why?

HENSLOWE

I live there.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, to be you!
To read the faces and to write the dreams,
To hear the voices and record the songs,
To grave upon the metal of my mind
All great men, lordlier than they know themselves,
And fowler-like to fling my net o'er London,
And some let fly, and clip the wings of some
Fit for my notes; till one fine day I catch
The Governess of England as she goes
To solemn service with her gentlemen:
(What thoughts behind the mask, beneath the crown?)
Queen! The crowd's eyes are yours, but not my eyes!
Queen! To my piping you shall unawares
Strut on my stage for me! You laugh? I swear
I'll make that thrice-wrapped, politic, vain heart
My horn-book (as you all are) whence I'll learn

How Julius frowned, and Elinor rode her way
Rough-shod, and Egypt met ill-news. I'll do it,
Though I hold horses in the streets for hire,
Once I am come to London.

HENSLOWE

Come with us
And there's no holding horses! Part and pay
Are ready, and we start to-night.

SHAKESPEARE

I cannot.
I'm Whittington at cross-roads, but the bells
Ring "Turn again to Stratford!" not to London.

HENSLOWE

Well—as you choose!

SHAKESPEARE

As I choose? *I! I* choose?
I'm married to a woman near her time
That needs me! Choose? I am not twenty, sir!
What devil sped you here to bid me choose?
I knew a boy went wandering in a wood,
Drunken with common dew and beauty-mad
And moonstruck. Then there came a nightshade witch,
Locked hands with him, small hands, hot hands, down drew him,
Sighing—"Love me, love me!" as a ring-dove sighs,
(How white a woman is, under the moon!)
She was scarce human. Yet he took her home,
And now she's turned in the gross light of day,
To a haggard scold, and he handfasted sits

Breaking his heart—and yet the spell constrains him.
This is not I, not I, for I am bound
To a good wife and true, that loves me; but—
I tell you I could write of such a man,
And make you laugh and weep at such a man,
For your own manhood's sake, so bound, so bound.

HENSLOWE

Laugh? Weep? No, I'd be a friend to such a man! Go to him now and tell him from me—or no! Go rather to this wife of his that loves him well, you say—?

SHAKESPEARE

Too well!

HENSLOWE

Why, man, it's common! Or too light, too low,
Not once in a golden age love's scale trims level.

SHAKESPEARE

I read of lovers once in Italy—

HENSLOWE

You'll write of lovers too, not once nor twice.

SHAKESPEARE

Their scales were level ere they died of love,
In Italy.

HENSLOWE

But if instead they had lived—in Stratford—there'd have been such a see-saw in six months as—

SHAKESPEARE

As what?

HENSLOWE

As there has been, eh?
"See-saw! Margery Daw!
She sold her bed to lie upon straw."
And so—poor Margery! Though she counts me an enemy—poor Margery!

SHAKESPEARE

What help for Margery—and her Jack?

HENSLOWE

None, friend, in Stratford.

SHAKESPEARE

Do I not know it?

HENSLOWE

Then—tell Margery!

SHAKESPEARE

Deaf, deaf!

HENSLOWE

Not if you tell her how all heels in London
(And the Queen dances!)
So trip to the Stratford tune that I hot-haste
Am sent to fetch the fiddler—

SHAKESPEARE

Man, is it true?
True that the Queen—?

HENSLOWE

I say—tell Margery!
What! is she a woman, a wife, and will not further her man? I say to you—tell Margery, as I tell you—

SHAKESPEARE

You do?

HENSLOWE

I do. I do tell you that if you can come away with us now with your 'Dream' in your pocket, and teach it to us and learn of us while you teach, and strike London in time for the Queen's birthday—I tell you and I tell her, Jack's a made man. See what Margery says to that, and give me the answer, stay or come, as I pass here to-night! And now let me go; for if I do not soon whip my company clear of apple-juice and apple-bloom, clear, that is to say, of Stratford wine and Stratford women, we shall *not* pass here to-night.

[*He goes out.*]

SHAKESPEARE

To-night!

[*Calling.*]

Anne! Anne!

[*He walks up and down.*]

Oh, to be one of them to-night on the silver road—to smell the steaming frost and listen to men's voices and the ring of iron on the London road!

[*Calling.*]

Anne!

ANNE

[*Entering.*]

You called? He's gone? You're angry? Oh, not now,
No anger now; for, Will, to-night in the sky,
Our sky, a new star shines.

SHAKESPEARE

What's that? You know?

ANNE

I know, and oh, my heart sings.

SHAKESPEARE

Anne, dear Anne,
You know? No frets? You wish it? Oh, dear Anne,
How did you guess and know?

ANNE

My mother told me.

SHAKESPEARE

She heard us? Did she hear—they've read the play,
And the Queen's asked for me! London, Anne!
London!
I'll send you London home, my lass, by the post—
Such frocks and fancies! London! London, Anne!
And you, you know? and speed me hence? By God,
That's my own wife at last, all gold to me
And goodness! Anne, be better to me still
And help me hence to-night!

ANNE

It dips, it dies,
A night-light, Mother, and no star. I grope
Giddily in the dark.

SHAKESPEARE

What did she tell you?

ANNE

No matter. Oh, it earns not that black look.
London? the Queen? I'll help you, oh, be sure!
Too glad to see you glad.

SHAKESPEARE

Anne, it's good-bye
To Stratford till the game's won.

ANNE

What care I
So you are satisfied? The farm must go—
That's little—

SHAKESPEARE

Must it go?

ANNE

Dreamer, how else
Shall we two live in London?

SHAKESPEARE

We, do you say?
They'd have me travel with them—a rough life—

ANNE

I care not!

SHAKESPEARE

—and you're ailing.

ANNE

Better soon.

SHAKESPEARE

You'll miss your mother.

ANNE

Mothers everywhere
Will help a girl. I'm strong.

SHAKESPEARE

It will not do!
I have my world to learn, and learn alone.
I will not dangle at your apron-strings.

ANNE

I'll be no tie. I'll be your follower
And scarce your wife; but let me go with you!

SHAKESPEARE

If you could see but once, once, with my eyes!

ANNE

Will! let me go with you!

SHAKESPEARE

I tell you—no!
Leave me to go my way and rule my life
After my fashion! I'll not lean on you
Because you're seven years wiser.

ANNE

That too, O God!

SHAKESPEARE

And if I hurt you—for I know I do,
I'm not so rapt—think of me, if you can,
As a man stifled that wildly throws his arms,
Raking the air for room—for room to breathe,
And so strikes unaware, unwillingly,
His lover!

ANNE

I could sooner think of you
Asleep, and I beside you with the child,
And all this passion ended, as it must,
In quiet graves; for we have been such lovers
As there's no room for in the human air
And daylight side of the grass. What shall I do?
And how live on? Why did you marry me?

SHAKESPEARE

You know the why of that.

ANNE

Too well we know it,
I and the child. You have well taught this fool
That thought a heart of dreams, a loving heart,
A soul, a self resigned, could better please
Than the blind flesh of a woman; for God knows
Your self drew me, the folded man in you,
Not, not the boy-husk.

SHAKESPEARE

Yet the same God knows
When folly was, you willed it first, not I.

ANNE

Old! Old as Adam! and untrue, untrue!
Why did you come to me at Shottery,
Out of your way, so often? laugh with me
Apart, and answer for me as of right,
As if you knew me better (ah, it was sweet!)
Than my own brothers? And on Sunday eves
You'd wait and walk with me the long way home
From church, with me alone, the foot-path way,
Across the fields where wild convolvulus
Strangles the corn—

SHAKESPEARE

Strangles the corn indeed!

ANNE

—and still delay me talking at the stile,
Long after curfew, under the risen moon.

Why did you come? Why did you stay with me,
To make me love, to make me think you loved me?

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, you were easy, cheap, you flattered me.

ANNE

[*Crying out.*]

I did not.

SHAKESPEARE

Why, did you not look at me
As I were God? And for a while I liked it.
It fed some weed in me that since has withered;
For now I like it not, nor like you for it!

ANNE

That is your fate, you change, you must ever be changing,
You climb from a boy to a man, from a man to a god,
And the god looks back on the man with a smile, and the man on the boy with wonder;
But I, I am woman for ever: I change not at all.
You hold out your hands to me—heaven: you turn from me—hell;
But neither the hell nor the heaven can change me: I love you: I change not at all.

SHAKESPEARE

All this leads not to London, and for London
I am resolved: if not to-night—

ANNE

To-night?

SHAKESPEARE

As soon as maybe. When the child is born—
When will the child be born?

ANNE

Soon, soon—

SHAKESPEARE

How soon?

ANNE

I think—I do not know—

SHAKESPEARE

In March?

ANNE

Who knows?

SHAKESPEARE

Did you not tell me March?

ANNE

Easter—

SHAKESPEARE

That's May!
It should be March.

ANNE

It—should be—March—

SHAKESPEARE

Why, Anne?

ANNE

Stay with me longer! Wait till Whitsuntide,
Till June, till summer comes, and if, when you see
Your own son, still you'll leave us, why, go then!
But sure, you will not go.

SHAKESPEARE

Summer? Why summer?
It should be spring, not summer—

ANNE

I'll not bear
These questions, like coarse fingers, prying out
My secrets.

SHAKESPEARE

Secrets?

ANNE

Secrets? I? I've none—
I never meant—I know not why the word
Came to me, "secret." Yet you're all secret thoughts
And plans you do not share. Why should not I
Be secret, if I choose? But see, I'll tell you
All, all—some other time—were there indeed
A thing to tell—

SHAKESPEARE

When will the child be born?

ANNE

If it were—June? My mother said to-day
It might be June—July— This woman's talk
Is not for you—

SHAKESPEARE

July?

ANNE

Oh, I must laugh
Because you look and look—don't look at me!
June! May! I swear it's May! I said the spring,
And May is still the girlhood of the year.

SHAKESPEARE

July! A round year since you came to me!
Then—when you came to me, in haste, afraid,
All tears, and clung to me, and white-lipped swore
You had no friend but Avon if I failed you,
It was a lie?

ANNE

Don't look at me!

SHAKESPEARE

No need?
You forced me with a lie?

ANNE

Now there is—now!

SHAKESPEARE

You locked me in this prison with a lie?

ANNE

I loved you.

SHAKESPEARE

And you lied to me—

ANNE

To hold you.
I couldn't lose you. I was mad with pain.

SHAKESPEARE

Are you so weak,
So candle-wavering, that a gust of pain
Could snuff out honour?

ANNE

'Ware this hurricane
Of pain! The deserts heed it not, nor rocks,

Nor the perpetual sea; but oh, the fields
Where barley grows and small beasts hide, they fear—
And haggard woods that feel its violent hand
Entangled in their hair and wrestling, shriek
Crashing to ruin. What shall their pensioners
Do now, the rustling mice, the anemones,
The whisking squirrels, ivies, nightingales,
The hermit bee whose summer goods were stored
In a south bank? How shall the small things stand
Against the tempest, against the cruel sun
That stares them, homeless, out of countenance,
Through the day's heats?

SHAKESPEARE

Coward! They see the sun
Though they die seeing, and the wider view,
The vast horizons, the amazing skies
Undreamed before.

ANNE

I cannot see so far.
I want my little loves, I want my home.
My life is rooted up, my prop is gone,
And like a vine I lie upon the ground,
Muddied and broken.

SHAKESPEARE

I could be sorry for you
Under the heavy hand of God or man
But your own hand has slain yourself and me.
Woman, the shame of it, to trap me thus,
Knowing I never loved you!

ANNE

Oh, for a month—
In the spring, in the long grass, under the apple-trees—

SHAKESPEARE

I never loved you.

ANNE

Think, when I hurt my hand
With the wild rose, it was then you said "Dear Anne!"

SHAKESPEARE

I have forgotten.

ANNE

On Midsummer Eve—
There was a dream about a wood you told me,
Me—not another—

SHAKESPEARE

I was drunk with dreams
That night.

ANNE

That night, that night you loved me, Will!
Oh, never look at me and say—that night,
Under the holy moon, there was no love!

SHAKESPEARE

You knew it was not love.

ANNE

O God, I knew,
And would not know! You never came again.
I hoped. I prayed. I hoped. I loved you so.
You never came.

And must I go to you? I was ashamed.
Yet in the wood I waited, waited, Will,
Night after night I waited, waited, Will,
Till shame itself was swallowed up in pain,
In pain of waiting, and—I went to you.

SHAKESPEARE

That lie upon those loving lips?

ANNE

That lie.

SHAKESPEARE

There was no child?

ANNE

The hope, the hope of children,
To bind you to me—a true hope to hold you—
No lie—a little lie—I loved you so—
Scarcely a lie—a promise to come true
Of gifts between us and a love to come.

SHAKESPEARE

You're mad! You're mad!

ANNE

I was mad. I am sane.
I am blind Samson, shaking down the house
Of torment on myself as well as you.

SHAKESPEARE

What gain was there? What gain?

ANNE

What gain but you?
The sight of your face and the sound of your foot on the stair,

And your casual word to a stranger—"This is my wife!"
For the touch of my hand on your arm, as a right, when we walked with the neighbours:
For the son, for the son on my heart, with your smile and your frown:
For the loss of my name in the name that you gave when you said to him—"Mother! your mother!"
For your glance at me over his head when he brought us his toys or his tears:
Have pity! Have pity! Have pity! for these things I did it.

SHAKESPEARE

Words! Words! You lied to me. Go your own road!
I know you not.

ANNE

But I, but I know you.
Have I not learned my god's face? Have I not seen
The great dreams cloud it, as the ships of the sky
Darken the river? Has not the wind struck home,
The following chill wind that stirs all straws
Of omen? You're to be great, God pity you!
I'm your poor village woman; but I know
What you must learn and learn, and shriek to God
To spare you learning, if you will be great,
Singing to men and women across fields
Of years, and hearing answer as they reap,
Afar, the centuried fields, "He knew, he knew!"
How will they listen to you—voice that cries

"Right's right! Wrong's wrong! For every sin a stone!
"Ye shall not plead to any god or man—
" 'I flinched because the pain was very great,'
" 'I fell because the burden bore me down,'
" 'Hungry, I stole.' " O boy, ungrown, at judgment,
How will they listen? What? I lied? Oh, blind!
When I, your own, show you my heart of hearts,
A book for you to read all women by,
Blindly you turn my page with—"Here are lies!"

SHAKESPEARE

Subtle enough—and glitter may be gold
In women's eyes—you say so—though to a man,
Boy rather (boy, you called me) lies are lies,
Base money, though you rub 'em till they shine,
Ill money to buy love with; but—I care not!
So be at ease! My love's not confiscate,
For none was yours to forfeit. Faith indeed,
A weakling trust is gone, for though you irked me
I thought you honest and so bore much from you—
Your jealous-glancing eye, officious hand
Meddling my papers, fool's opinion given
Unasked when strangers spoke with me, and laughter
Suddenly checked as if you feared a blow
As a dog does—it made me mad!

ANNE

Go on!

SHAKESPEARE

For when did I use you ill?

ANNE

Go on!

SHAKESPEARE

What need?
All's in a word—your ever-presence here
As if you'd naught in life to do but watch me—

ANNE

Go on!

SHAKESPEARE

All this, I say, I bore, because at heart
I did believe you loved me. Well—it's gone!
And I go with it—free, a free man, free!
Anne! for that word I could forgive you all
And go from you in peace.

ANNE

[*Catching at his arm.*]

You shall not go!

SHAKESPEARE

Shall not? This burr—how impudent it clings!

ANNE

You have not heard me—

SHAKESPEARE

Let me go, I say!
My purse, my papers—

ANNE

Will!

SHAKESPEARE

Talk to the walls,
For I hear nothing!

ANNE

Why, a murderess
Has respite in my case—and I—and I—
What have I done but love you, when all's said?
You will not leave me now, now when that lie
Is certain truth at last, and in me sleeps
Like God's forgiveness? For I felt it stir
When you were angry—I was angry too,
My fault, all mine—but I was sick and faint
And frightened, so I railed, because no word
Matched with the strong need in me suddenly
For gentlest looks and your beloved arms
About this body changed and shaking so;
But why I knew not. But my mother knew
And told me.

SHAKESPEARE

O wise mother!

ANNE

Will, it's true!

SHAKESPEARE

Practice makes perfect, as we wrote at school!

ANNE

I swear to you—

SHAKESPEARE

As then you swore to me.
Not twice, not twice, my girl!

ANNE

O God, God Son!
Pitiful God! If there be other lives,
As I have heard him say, as his books say,

In other bodies, for Your Mother's sake
And all she knows (God, ask her what she knows!)
Let me not be a woman! Let me be
Some twisting worm on a hook, or fish they catch
And fling again to catch another year,
Or otter trapped and broiled in the sun three days,
Or lovely bird whose living wing men tear
From its live body, or of Italy
Some peasant's drudge-horse whipped upon its eyes,
Or let me as a heart-burst, screaming hare
Be wrenched in two by slavering deaths for sport;
But let me not again be cursed a woman
Surrendered to the mercy of her man!

[*She sinks down in a crouching heap by the hearth. There has been a sound of many voices drawing nearer, and as she ceases speaking, the words of a song become clear.*]

THE PLAYERS

[*Singing.*]

Come with us to London,
Folly, come away!
We'll make your fortune
On a summer day.
Leave your sloes and mulberries!
There are riper fruits than these,
In London, in London,
Oh, London Town!
For winds will blow
And barley grow
Without you, without you,
And the world get on without you—
Oh, London Town!

[*The voices drop to a low hum. Henslowe thrusts his head in at the window.*]

HENSLOWE

The sun's down. The sky's as yellow as a London fog. Well, what's it to be?

SHAKESPEARE

London! The future in a golden fog!

HENSLOWE

Come then!

SHAKESPEARE

I'll fetch my bundle. Wait for me! What voices?

HENSLOWE

The rest of us, the people of the plays.
We're all here waiting for you.

SHAKESPEARE

Come in, all! all

HENSLOWE

Does your wife say to us—"Come in!"?

SHAKESPEARE

What wife?

[*He hurries up the stairs and disappears.*]

HENSLOWE

[*Opening the outer door.*]

May we come in?

ANNE

You heard him.

HENSLOWE

We ask you.

ANNE

It's his house.

HENSLOWE

[*Humming.*]

While fortune waits
Within the gates
Of London, of London—
He must be quick!

ANNE

Am *I* to tell him so?

HENSLOWE

The new moon's up and reaping in a sky
Like corn—that's frost! A bitter travelling night
Before us—

ANNE

[*Going to the window.*]

So it is.

HENSLOWE

Not through the glass!
You'll buy ill luck of the moon.

ANNE

I bought ill fortune
Long months ago under the shifty moon,
I saw her through the midnight glass of the air
Milky with light, when trees my casement were,
And little twigs the leads that held my pane.
I'm out of luck for ever.

HENSLOWE

Did I not tell you you feared your fortune? But there are some in the company can tell you a better, if you'll let 'em in.

THREE PLAYERS IN MASKS

[Tapping at the window.]

Let us in! Let us in! Let us in!

ANNE

I will not let you in. Wait for your fellow
On the high road! He'll come to you soon enough

[She turns from them and seats herself by the fire.]

A PLAYER

[Dressed as a king, over Henslowe's shoulder.]

Are we never to come in? It's as cold as charity since the sun set.

ANNE

It's no warmer here.

A CHILD

[Poking his head under the Player's arm.]

I can't feel my fingers.

[Anne looks at him. Her face changes.]

ANNE

If the fire warms you, you may warm yourselves.

[The Players stream in.]

It does not warm me. Look! It cannot warm me.

[She thrusts her hand into the flame.]

HENSLOWE

God's sake!

[He pulls her back. The Players stare and whisper together.]

ANNE

Eyes! Needle eyes! Why do you stare and point?

Like you I would have warmed myself. Vain, vain!
It's a strange hearth. You players are the first
It ever warmed or welcomed. Charity?
Who said it—"Cold as charity"? That's love!
But there's no love here. Baby, stay away!
You'll freeze less out in churchyard night than here,
For here's not even charity.

THE CHILD

[*Warming his hands.*]

I'm not a baby. I'm nearly eleven. I've played children's parts for years. I'm getting warmer. Are you?

ANNE

No.

CHILD

I like this house. I'd like to stay here. I suppose there are things in that cupboard?

THE KING

[*Overhearing.*]

Now, now!

CHILD

That's my father. He's a king this week. He's only a duke as a rule. Are there apples in that cupboard? Will you give me one?

[*Anne goes to the cupboard and takes out an apple.*]

ANNE

Will you give me a kiss?

CHILD

For my apple?

ANNE

No, for love.

CHILD

I don't love you.

ANNE

For luck, then.

CHILD

You told him you'd got no luck.

ANNE

Won't you give me a kiss?

CHILD

If you like. Don't hold me so tight. Is it true you've no luck? Shall I tell your fortune?

ANNE

Can you?

CHILD

O yes! I've watched the Fates do it in the new play. It's Orpheus and—it's a long name. But she's his lost wife. Give me a handkerchief! That's for a grey veil.

[*Posing.*]

Now say to me—"Who are you?"

ANNE

Who are you?

CHILD

[*Posing.*]

Fate! Now you must say—"Whose fate?"

ANNE

Whose?

CHILD

Oh, then I lift the veil and you scream.

[*Stamping his foot.*]

Scream!

ANNE

Why, baby?

CHILD

[*Frowning.*]

At my dreadful face.

[*But he begins to laugh in spite of himself.*]

ANNE

[*Her face hidden.*]

Oh, child! Oh, child!

CHILD

That's right! That's the way she cries in the play. You see the man goes down to hell to find his wife, and the Fates show her what's going to happen while she's waiting for him. She's in hell already, waiting and waiting. It takes years to travel through hell. That's her talking to the old man in rags and a crown.

ANNE

Who's he?

CHILD

Oh, he's a poor old king whose daughters beat him. He isn't in this play. Well, when Orpheus gets to hell —I lead him there, you know—

ANNE

A babe in hell—a babe in hell—

CHILD

I'm the little god of love. I wear a crown of roses and wings. They do tickle. Soon I'll be too big. So he and I go to the three Fates to get back his wife. She isn't pretty in that act. She's all white and dead round her eyes—like you.

ANNE

Does he find her?

CHILD

After he sings his beautiful song he does. Everybody has to listen when he sings. Even the big dog lies down. Your husband made us a nice catch about it yesterday. I like your husband. I'm glad he's coming with us. Are you coming with us?

ANNE

No.

CHILD

It's a pity. If you were a man you could act in the company. But women can't act. Even Orpheus' wife is a boy really. So are the three Fates. They're friends of mine. Would you like to talk to them, the way we do in the play? Come on! I go first, you see. You must say just what I tell you.

[*He takes her hands and pulls her to her feet. She stares, bewildered, for the room has grown dim. The dying fire shines upon the shifting, shadowy figures of the Players. The crowd grows larger every moment and is thickest at the foot of the stairs. Shakespeare is seen coming down them.*]

ANNE

The room's so full. I'm frightened. Who are all these people?

CHILD

Hush! We're in hell. These are all the dead people. We bring 'em to life.

ANNE

Who? We?

CHILD

I and the singer. Look, there's your husband coming down the stairs! That's just the way Orpheus comes down into hell.

ANNE

Will! Will!

CHILD

Hush! You mustn't talk.

ANNE

But it's all dreams—it's all dreams.

CHILD

It's the players.

SHAKESPEARE

[*Among the shadows.*]

Let me pass!

THE SHADOWS

Pay toll!

SHAKESPEARE

How, pay it?

A SHADOW

Tell my story?

ANOTHER

And mine!

ANOTHER

And mine!

ANOTHER

And mine!

A ROMAN WOMAN

Pluck back my dagger first and tell my story!

A DROWNED GIRL

Oh, listen, listen, listen, I've forgotten my own story. It's a very sad one. Remember for me!

SHAKESPEARE

I will remember. Let me pass!

A TROJAN WOMAN

[*Kissing him.*]

Here's pay.

A VENETIAN

I died of love.

THE TROJAN WOMAN

Kiss me and tell my story!

A MOOR

Dead lips, dead lips!

A YOUNG MAN

This is how Judas kissed.

A QUEEN

My son was taken from me. Tell my story.

ANOTHER

And mine!

ANOTHER

And mine!

A YOUNG MAN

That son am I!

TWO CHILDREN

I—I—

A SOLDIER

I killed a king.

A CROWNED SHADOW

He killed me while I slept.

THE SHADOWS

You shall not pass until you tell our story!

A GIRL DRESSED AS A BOY

I lived in a wood and laughed. Sing you my laughter
When the sun shone!

SHAKESPEARE

I'll sing it. Singing I go,
What shall I find after the song is over?
What shall I find after the way is clear?

AN OLD MAN, A JEW

Gold and gold and gold—

A CLOWN

And a grave untended—

A MAN IN BLACK

Heartbreak—

TWO COUSINS

A friend or two—

A ROMAN WITH LAURELS

Oh, sing my story
Before I had half-way climbed to the nearest star
My ladder broke.

SHAKESPEARE

I'll tell all time that story.

THE ROMAN

The stars are dark, seen close.

SHAKESPEARE

I'll say it.

THE ROMAN

Pass!

AN EGYPTIAN

[*Holding a goblet.*]

He shall not pass. Drink! There are pearls in the cup.

A GIRL, A VERONESE

[*Taking it from her.*]

No—sleep!

A MAN

[*With a wand.*]

Dreams!

THE KING IN RAGS

Frenzy!

A NUN

Sacrament!

A DRUNKARD

A jest!

A ROMAN WIFE

Here's coals for bread.

THE EGYPTIAN

[*A man in armour has flung his arm about her neck.*]

Eat, drink and pass again
To the lost sunshine and the passionate nights,
And tell the world our story!

SHAKESPEARE

Let me go!

ALL THE SHADOWS

Never, never, never! To the end of time we follow,
Follow, follow, follow!

SHAKESPEARE

Threads and floating wisps
Of being, how they fasten like a cloud
Of gnats upon me, not to be shaken off
Unsatisfied—

THE SHADOWS

Sing! Sing!

[*There is a strain of music the crowd hides Shakespeare: the three masked players have drifted free of the turmoil.*]

CHILD

[*Delighted.*]

He does it quite as well as Orpheus.

ANNE

Who are these dreams?

CHILD

The people of the plays. And there are the Fates at last! That's the end of my part. Now you must talk to them till your husband comes. He comes when you scream.

[*He picks up his bow and runs away.*]

ANNE

Come back! Stay by me!

CHILD

[*Laughing.*]

Play your part alone.

[*He is lost in the crowd. The Masks have drawn near. The first is small and closely veiled and carries the distaff. The second is tall: part of her face shows white: her hands are empty. The third is bowed and crowned: she carries the shears.*]

ANNE

These are all dreams or I am mad. Who are you?

FIRST MASK

His fate. I hold the thread.

ANNE

I'll see you!

FIRST MASK

No!

[*As she retreats the Second Mask takes the distaff from her.*]

SECOND MASK

I tangle it.

ANNE

Who are you?

SECOND MASK

Fate! his fate!

ANNE

Drop the bright mask and let me see!

[*The Second Mask drops her veil and shows the face of a dark lady.*]

It needs not!

I knew, I knew! Barren the ground beneath,

No flowers, no fruit, spent arrows—

[*The Second Mask makes way for the Third who takes the tangle from her. The Second Mask glides away.*]

Not the shears!

THIRD MASK

[*Winding the thread.*]

Not yet!

ANNE

Who are you?

THIRD MASK

Fate! his fate!

ANNE

A crown!

My snake should know its fellow—is it so?

[*The mask is lifted and reveals the face of Elizabeth.*]

I do not fear the Queen—

THIRD MASK

Take back the thread!

[*She gives the distaff to the First Mask who has reappeared beside her and glides away.*]

ANNE

But you I fear, O shrinking fate! what fate?
What first and last fate? Show me your face, I say!

[*She tears off the mask. The face revealed is the face of Anne. She screams.*]

Myself! I saw myself! Will! Will!

[*The Child kneeling at the hearth stirs the fire and a bright flame shoots up that lights the whole room. It is empty save for the few players gathering together their bundles and Shakespeare who has hurried to Anne. His hand, gripping her shoulder, steadies her as she sways.*]

SHAKESPEARE

Still railing?

CHILD

[*To his father.*]

She's a poor frightened lady and she cried. I like her.

ANNE

Gone! Gone! Where are they! Call them back! I saw—

SHAKESPEARE

What folly! These are players and my friends;
You could have given them food at least and served them.

ANNE

I saw—I saw—

HENSLOWE

[*Coming up to them.*]

So, are you ready? The moon is high: we must be going.

SHAKESPEARE

I'll follow instantly.

[*The Players trail out by twos and threes. They pass the window and repass it on the further side of the hedge. They are a black, fantastic frieze upon the yellow, winter sky. Henslowe goes first: the king's crown is crooked, and the child is riding on his back: the masks come last.*]

THE PLAYERS

[*Singing.*]

Come away to London,
Folly, come away!

You'll make your fortune
Thrice in a day.
Paddocks leave and winter byres,
London has a thousand spires,
A-chiming, a-rhyming,
Oh, London Town!
The snow will fall
And cover all
Without you, without you,
And the world get on without you—
Oh, London Town!

[*Shakespeare goes hurriedly to the table and picks up his books.*]

ANNE

Will!

SHAKESPEARE

For your needs
You have the farm. Farewell!

ANNE

[*Catching at his arm.*]

For pity's sake!
I'm so beset with terrors not my own—
What have you loosed upon me? I'll not be left
In this black house, this kennel of chained grief,
This ghost-run. Take me with you! No, stay by me!
These are but dreams of evil. Shall we not wake
Drowsily in a minute? Oh, bless'd waking
To peace and sunshine and no evil done!
Count out the minute—

SHAKESPEARE

If ever I forget
The evil done me, I'll forget the spring,
And Avon, and the blue ways of the sky,
And my own mother's face.

ANNE

Do I say "forget"?
I say "remember"! When you've staked all, all,
Upon your one throw—when you've lost—remember!
And done the evilest thing you would not do,
Self-forced to the vile wrong you would not do,
Me in that hour remember!

SHAKESPEARE

Let me go!

ANNE

[She is on the ground, clinging to him.]

Remember! See, I do not pray "forgive"!
Forgive? Forgiving is forgetting—no,
Remember me! Remember, when your sun
Blazes the noon down, that my sun is set,
Extinct and cindered in a bitter sea,
And warm me with a thought. For we are bound
Closer than love or chains or marriage binds:
We went by night and each in other's heart
Sowed tares, sowed tears. Husband, when harvest comes,
Of all your men and women I alone
Can give you comfort, for you'll reap my pain
As I your loss. What other knows our need?

Dear hands, remember, when you hold her, thus,
Close, close—

SHAKESPEARE

Let go my hands!

ANNE

—and when she turns
To stone, to a stone, to an unvouchsafing stone
Under your clutch—

SHAKESPEARE

You rave!

ANNE

—loved hands, remember
Me unloved then, and how my hands held you!
And when her face—for I am prophecy—
When her lost face, the woman I am not,
Stares from the page you toil upon, thus, thus,
In a glass of tears, remember then that thus,
No other way,
I see your face between my work and me,
Always!

SHAKESPEARE

Make end and let me go!

ANNE

[*She has risen.*]

Why, go!
But mock me not with any "Let me go"!
I do not hold you. Ah, but when you're old
(You will be old one day, as I am old
Already in my heart), too weary-old

For love, hate, pity, anything but peace,
When the long race, O straining breast! is won,
And the bright victory drops to your outstretched hand,
A windfall apple, not worth eating, then
Come back to me—

SHAKESPEARE
[*At the door.*]

Farewell!

ANNE

—when all your need
Is hands to serve you and a breast to die on,
Come back to me—

SHAKESPEARE

Never in any world!

[*He goes out as the last figure passes the window, and disappears.*]

THE PLAYERS' VOICES
[*Dying away.*]

For snow will fall
And cover all
Without you, without you—

[*The words are lost.*]

SHAKESPEARE
[*Joyfully.*]

Ah! London Town!

[*He is seen an instant, a silhouette with outstretched arms. Then he, too, disappears and there is a long silence. A cold wind blows in through the open door. The room is quite dark and the fire has fallen to ashes.*]

ANNE

[*Crying out suddenly.*]

The years—the years before me!

MRS. HATHAWAY

[*Calling.*]

Anne! Where's Anne?

[*She comes in at the side door.*]

Anne! Anne! Where are you? Why, what do you here,
In the cold, in the dark, and all alone?

ANNE

I wait.

THE CURTAIN FALLS.

ACT II.

SCENE I.

[*A room at the Palace. Elizabeth sits at a working table. She is upright, vigorous, with an ivory white skin and piercing eyes. Her hair is dark red and stiffly dressed. She is old, as an oak or a cliff or a cathedral is old—there is no frailty of age in her. Her gestures are measured, she moves very little, and frowns oftener than she smiles, but her smile, when it does come, is kindly. Her voice is strong, rather harsh, but clear. She speaks her words like a scholar, but her manner is that of a woman of the world, shrewd and easy. Her dress is a black-green brocade, stiff with gold and embroidered with coloured stones. Beside her stands Henslowe, ten years older, stouter and more prosperous. In the background Mary Fitton, a woman of twenty-six, sits at the virginals, fingering out a tune very faintly and lightly. She is taller than Elizabeth, pale, with black hair, a smiling mouth and brilliant eyes. She is quick and graceful as a cat, and her voice is the voice of a singer, low and full. She wears a magnificent black and white dress with many pearls. A red rose is tucked behind her ear.*]

ELIZABETH

Money, money! Always more money! Henslowe, you're a leech! And I'm a Gammer Gurton to let myself be bled. Let the public pay!

HENSLOWE

Madam, they'll do that fast enough if we may call ourselves Your Majesty's Players.

ELIZABETH

No, no, you're not yet proven. What do you give me? Good plays enough, but what great play? What has England, what have I, to match against them when they talk to me of their Tasso, their Petrarch, their Rabelais—of Divine Comedies and the plays of Spain? Are we to climb no higher than the Germans with their 'Ship of Fools'?

HENSLOWE

'The Faery Queen'?

ELIZABETH

Unfinished.

HENSLOWE

Green—Peele—Kyd—Webster—

ELIZABETH

Stout English names—not names for all the world. I will pay you no more good English pounds a year and fib to my treasurer to account for them. You head a deputation, do you? You would call yourselves the Queen's Players, and mount a crown on your curtains? Give me a great play then—a royal play—a play to set against France and Italy and Spain, and you can have your patent.

HENSLOWE

There's 'Tamburlaine'!

ELIZABETH

A boy's glory, not a man's.

HENSLOWE

'Faust' and 'The Jew of Malta'!

ELIZABETH

I know them.

HENSLOWE

He'll do greater things yet.

ELIZABETH

Do you believe that, Henslowe?

HENSLOWE

No, Madam.

ELIZABETH

Then why do you lie to me?

HENSLOWE

Madam, I mark time. I have my man; but he is not yet ripe.

ELIZABETH

How long have you served me, Henslowe?

HENSLOWE

Twelve years.

ELIZABETH

How often have you come to me in those twelve years?

HENSLOWE

Four times, Madam!

ELIZABETH

Have I helped or hindered?

HENSLOWE

I confess it, Madam, I have lived on your wits.

ELIZABETH

Then who's your man?

HENSLOWE

You'll not trust me. He has done little before the world.

ELIZABETH

Shakespeare?

HENSLOWE

Madam, you know everything. Will you see him? He and Marlowe are among our petitioners.

ELIZABETH

H'm! the Stratford boy! I have not forgotten.

HENSLOWE

Who could have promised better? He came to town like a conqueror. He took us all with his laughter. You yourself, Madam—

ELIZABETH

Yes, make us laugh and you may pick all pockets! He helped you to pick mine.

HENSLOWE

So far good. But he aims no higher. Yet what he could do if he would! I have a sort of love of him, Madam. I found him: I taught him: I have daughters enough but no son. I have wrestled with him like Jacob at Peniel, but when I think to conquer he tickles my rib and I laugh. That's his weapon, Madam! With his laughter he locks the door of his heart against every man.

ELIZABETH

And every woman?

HENSLOWE

They say—no, Madam!

ELIZABETH

Then we must find her.

HENSLOWE

[*With a glance at Mary Fitton.*]

They say she is found already. But a court lady —and a player! It's folly, Madam! Now Marlowe would shrug his shoulder and go elsewhere; but Shakespeare—there is about him in little and great a certain dogged and damnable constancy that wrecks all. If he cannot have the moon for his supper, he will starve, Madam, whatever an old fool says to him.

ELIZABETH

Then, Henslowe, we must serve him up the moon. Mary!

MARY

[*Rising and coming down to them.*]

Madam?

ELIZABETH

Could you hear us?

MARY

I was playing the new song that the Earl set for you.

ELIZABETH

For me? But you heard?

MARY

Something of the talk, Madam!

ELIZABETH

You go to all the plays, do you not? Which is the coming man, Mary, Shakespeare or Marlowe.

MARY

If you ask me, Madam, I'm all for the cobbler's son.

HENSLOWE

Mistress Fitton should give us a sound reason if she have it, but she has none.

MARY

Only that I don't know Mr. Marlowe, and I know my little Shakespeare by heart. I'm an Athenian—I'm always asking for new tunes.

ELIZABETH

Which is Shakespeare? The youngster like a smoking lamp, all aflare?

MARY

No, Madam! That's Marlowe. Shakespeare's a lesser man.

HENSLOWE

A lesser man? Marlowe the lamp, say you?
He's conflagration, he's "Armada!" flashed
From Kent to Cornwall! But this lesser man,
He's the far world the beacons can outflare
One little hour, but, when their flame dies down,
High o'er the embers in the deep of night
Behold the star!

ELIZABETH

I forget if ever I saw him.

HENSLOWE

Madam, if ever you saw him, you would not forget—
A small, a proud head, like an Arab Christ,
And noble, madman's fingers, never still—
The face still though, mouth hid, the nostril wide,
And eyes like voices calling, shrill and sad,
Borne on hot winds from fairyland or hell;
Yet round the heavy lids a score of lines
All criss-cross crinkle like a score of laughs
That he has scribbled hastily down himself
With his quick fingers. No, not tall—

ELIZABETH

But a man!

MARY

Like other men,

ELIZABETH

Ah?

MARY

It was easy.

ELIZABETH

Tell!

MARY

He came like a boy to apples. Marlowe now—

ELIZABETH

More than a man, less than a man, but not
As yet a man then? Well, I'll see your Shakespeare:
Marlowe—some other time.

HENSLOWE

I'll fetch him to you.

[*Henslowe goes out.*]

ELIZABETH

To you, Mary—to you!

MARY

O Madam, spare me! It's a stiff instrument and once, I think, has been ill-tuned.

ELIZABETH

Tune it afresh!

MARY

You wish that, Madam?

ELIZABETH

I wish it. Marlowe can wait—and Pembroke.

MARY

Madam?

ELIZABETH

I am blind, deaf, dumb, so long as you practise your new tune. But the Earl of Pembroke goes to Ireland.

MARY

He's an old glove, Madam.

ELIZABETH

Young or old, not for your wearing. Strip your hand and finger your new tune!

MARY

Now, Madam?

ELIZABETH

Why not? Why do I dress you and keep you at court? Here's Spain in the ante-room and France on the stairs—am I to keep them waiting while I humour a parcel of players?

MARY

Indeed, Madam, I wonder that you have spared half an hour.

ELIZABETH

Wonder, Mary! Wonder! And when you know why I do what I do you shall be Queen instead of me. In the meantime you may learn the trade, if you choose. I give you a kingdom to rule in the likeness of a poor player. Let me see how you do it! Yet mark this—though with fair cheeks and black hair you may come by a coronet (but the Earl goes to Ireland) yet if you rule your kingdom by the glance of your eyes, you will lose it as other Maries have done.

MARY

I must reign in my own way—forgive me, Madam! —not yours.

ELIZABETH

Girl, do you think you could ever rule in mine? Well, try your way! But—between queens, Mary—one kingdom at a time!

[*Elizabeth goes out.*]

MARY

[*She sits on the table edge, swinging her pretty foot.*]

So Pembroke goes to Ireland! Ay, and comes back,

old winter! I can wait. And while I wait—Shakespeare! Will Shakespeare! O charity—I wish it were Marlowe! What did the old woman say? A kingdom in the likeness of a player. I wonder. Well, we'll explore. Yet I wish it were Marlowe.

[*Shakespeare enters.*]

Ah! here comes poor Mr. Shakespeare looking for the Queen and finding—

SHAKESPEARE

The Queen!

MARY

Hush! Palace walls! Well, Mr. Shakespeare, what's the news?

SHAKESPEARE

Good, bad and indifferent.

MARY

Take the bad first.

SHAKESPEARE

The bad?—that I have not seen you some five weeks! The good—that I have now seen you some five seconds! The indifferent—that you do not care one pin whether I see you or not for the next five years!

MARY

Who told you that, Solomon?

SHAKESPEARE

I have had no answer to—

MARY

Five letters, seven sonnets, two catches and a roundelay!

SHAKESPEARE

Love's Labour Lost!

MARY

Ah, Mr. Shakespeare, you were not a Solomon then! There was too much Rosaline and too little Queen in that labour.

SHAKESPEARE

You're right! Solomon would have drawn all Rosaline and no Queen at all. I'll write another play!

MARY

It might pay you better than your sonnets.

SHAKESPEARE

Do you read them—Rosaline?

MARY

Most carefully, Mr. Shakespeare—on Saturday nights! Then I make up my accounts and empty my purse, and wonder—must I pawn my jewels? Then I cry. And then I read your latest sonnet and laugh again.

SHAKESPEARE

You should not laugh.

MARY

Why, is it not meant to move me?

SHAKESPEARE

You should not laugh. I tell you such a thought,
Such fiery lava welling from a heart,
So crystalled in the wonder-working brain,
Mined by the soul and rough-cut into words
Fit for a poet's faceting and, last,
Strung on a string of gold by a golden tongue—
Why, such a thought is an immortal jewel
To gild you, living, in men's eyes, and after
To make you queen of all the unjewelled dead
Who bear not their least bracelet hence. For I,
Eternally I'd deck you, were you my own,
Would you but wear my necklaces divine,
My rings of sorcery, my crowns of song.
What chains of emeralds—did you but know!
My rubies, O my rubies—could you but see!
And this one gem of wonder, pearl of pearls,
Hid in my heart for you, could you but take,
Would you but take—

MARY

Open your heart!

SHAKESPEARE

Not so.
The god who made it hath forgot the key,
Or lost or lent it.

MARY

Heartless god! Poor heart! -
Yet if this key—(is there indeed a key?)

SHAKESPEARE

No lock without a key, nor heart, nor heart.

MARY

—were found one day and strung with other keys
Upon my ring?

SHAKESPEARE

With other—?

MARY

Keys of hearts!
What else?
Tucked in the casket where my mortals lie—
Sick pearl, flawed emerald, brooch or coronet—

SHAKESPEARE

God!

MARY

Why, Jeweller?

SHAKESPEARE

Then what they say—

MARY

They say?
What do they say? And what care I? They say
Pembroke?

SHAKESPEARE

They lie! You shall not speak. They lie!

MARY

So little doubt—and you a man! It's new.
It's sweet. It will not last. We spoke of keys—
This heart-key, had I found it, would you buy?
Come, tempt me with immortal necklaces!
Come, purchase me with ornaments divine!

SHAKESPEARE

I love you—

MARY

Well?

SHAKESPEARE

I love you—

MARY

Is that all?

SHAKESPEARE

I love you so.

MARY

Why, that's a common cry,
I hear it daily, like the London cries,
"Old chairs to mend!" or "Sweet, sweet lavender!"
Is this your string of pearls, sixteen a penny?

SHAKESPEARE

D'you laugh at me? I mean it.

MARY

So do they all.
Buy! Buy my lavender! Lady, it's cheap—
It's sweet—new cut—I starve—for Christ's sake, buy!
They mean it, all the hoarse-throat, hungry men
That sell me lavender, that sell me love.

SHAKESPEARE

I put my wares away. I do not sell.

MARY

O pedlar! I had half a mind to buy.

SHAKESPEARE

Too late.

MARY

Open your pack again! What haste!
What—not a trinket left me, not a pin
For a poor lady? Does not the offer hold?

SHAKESPEARE

You did not close.

MARY

I will.

SHAKESPEARE

Withdrawn! Withdrawn!

MARY

Renew!

SHAKESPEARE

Too late.

MARY

You know your business best;
Yet—what care I?

SHAKESPEARE

Or I? Yet—never again
To buy and sell with you!

MARY

Never again!
Heigh-ho! I sighed, sir.

SHAKESPEARE

Yes, I heard you sigh.

MARY

And smiled. At court, sir—

SHAKESPEARE

Yes, they buy and sell
At court. But I know better—give and take!

MARY

[*Evading him.*]
What will you give me if I let you take?

SHAKESPEARE

If you will come with me into my mind—
How shall I say it? Still you'll laugh at me!

MARY

Maybe!

SHAKESPEARE

My mind's not one room stored, but many,
A house of windows that o'erlook far gardens,
The hanging gardens of more Babylons
Than there are bees in a linden tree in June.
I'm the king-prisoner in his capital,
Ruling strange peoples of a world unknown,
Yet there come envoys from the untravelled lands
That fill my corridors with miracles
As it were tribute, secretly, by night;
And I wake in the dawn like Solomon,
To stare at peacocks, apes and ivory,
And a closed door.
And all these stores I give you for your own,
You shall be mistress of my fairy-lands,
I'll ride you round the world on the back of a dream,
I'll give you all the stars that ever danced
In the sea o' nights,
If you will come into my mind with me,
If you will learn me—know me.

MARY

I do know you.
You are the quizzical Mr. Shakespeare of the 'Rose,'
who never means a word he says. I've heard of you.
All trades hate you because you are not of their union,

and yet know the tricks of each trade; but your own trade loves you, because you are content with a crook in the lower branches when you might be top of the tree. You write comedies, all wit and no wisdom, like a flower-bed raked but not dug; but the high stuff of the others, their tragedies and lamentable ends, these you will not essay. Why not, Mr. Shakespeare of the fairy-lands?

SHAKESPEARE

Queen Wasp, I do not know.

MARY

King Drone, then I will tell you. You are the little boy at Christmas who would not play snap-dragon till the flames died down, and so was left at the end with a cold raisin in an empty dish. That's you, that's you, with the careful fingers and no good word in your plays for any woman. Run home, run home, there's no more to you!

SHAKESPEARE

D'you think so?

MARY

I think that I think so.

SHAKESPEARE

I'll show you.

MARY

What will you show me, Will?

SHAKESPEARE

Fairyland, and you and me in it. Will you believe in me then?

MARY

Not I, not I! I'm a woman of this world. Give me flesh and blood, not gossamer,
Honey and heart-ache, and a lover's moon.

SHAKESPEARE

I read of lovers once in Italy—
She was like you, such eyes of night, such hair.
God took a week to make his world, but these
In four short days made heaven to burn on earth
Like a great torch; and when they died—

MARY

They died?

SHAKESPEARE

Like torches quenched in water, suddenly,
Because they loved too well.

MARY

Oh, write it down!
Ah, could you, Will? I think you could not write it.

SHAKESPEARE

I can write Romeo. Teach me Juliet!

MARY

I could if I would. Was that her name—Juliet?

SHAKESPEARE

Poor Juliet!

MARY

Not so poor if I know her. Oh, make that plain—she was not poor! And tell them, Will, tell all men and women—

SHAKESPEARE

What, my heart?

MARY

I will whisper it to you one day when I know you better. Oh, it'll be a play! Will you do it for me, Will? Will you write it for you and for me? Where do they live?

SHAKESPEARE

Verona. Italy.

MARY

Come to me daily! Read it to me scene by scene, line by line! How many acts?

SHAKESPEARE

The old five-branched candlestick.

MARY

But a new flame! Will it take long to write? ....
It must not.

SHAKESPEARE

Shall not.

MARY

What shall we call it, Will?
The Tragical Discourse? The Famous End?
The Lovers of Verona?

SHAKESPEARE

No, no! Plain.
Their two names married—Romeo and Juliet.

[*As they lean towards each other still talking*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ACT II.

SCENE II.

[*The first performance of Romeo and Juliet: the end of the fourth act. The curtain rises on a small bare dusty office, littered with stage properties and dresses. When the door at the back of the stage is open there is a glimpse of passage and curtains, and moving figures, with now and then a flare of torchlight. There is a continuous far-away murmur of voices and, once in a while, applause. As the curtain goes up Mary Fitton is opening the door to go out. Shakespeare holds her back.*]

MARY

Let go! Let me go! I must be in front at the end of that act. I must hear what the Queen will say to it.

SHAKESPEARE

But you'll come back?

That depends on what the Queen says. I've promised you nothing if she damns it.

[*The applause breaks out again.*]

SHAKESPEARE

Listen! Is it damned?

MARY

Sugar-sweet, isn't it? But that's nothing. That's the mob. That's your friends. They'll clap *you*. But the Queen, if she claps, claps your play.

SHAKESPEARE

Your play!

MARY

Is it mine? Earnest?

SHAKESPEARE

My earnest, but your play.

MARY

Well, good luck to my play!

SHAKESPEARE

Give me—

MARY

Oh, so it's not a free gift?

SHAKESPEARE

Give me a finger-tip of thanks!

MARY

In advance? Not I! But if the Queen likes it—I'm her obedient servant. If the Queen opens her hand I shan't shut mine. Where she claps once I'll clap twice. Where she gives you a hand to kiss, I'll give you— There! Curtain's down! I must go.

SHAKESPEARE

Mary!

MARY

Listen to it! Listen! Listen! This is better than any poor Mary.

[*She goes out. The door is left open. The applause breaks out again.*]

SHAKESPEARE

Is this the golden apple in my hand
At last?

How tastes it, heart, and is it sweet, is it sweet?
Sweeter than common apples? So many years
Of days I watched it grow and propped and pruned,
Besought the sun and watered. O my tree
When the green broke! That was a morning hour.
Fool, so to long for fruit! Now the fruit's ripe.
The tree in spring was fairest, when it flowered,
And every petal held a drink of dew.
The bloom went long ago. Well, the fruit's here!
Hark!

[*The applause breaks out again.*]

It goes well. Eat up your apple, man!
This is the hour, the hour! I'm the same man—
No better for it. When Marlowe praised me so
He meant it—meant it. I thought he laughed at me
In his sleeve. Will Shakespeare! Romeo and Juliet!
I made it—I! Indeed, indeed, at heart—
(I would not for the world they read my heart:
I'd scarce tell Mary) but indeed, at heart,
I know no song was ever sung before
Like this my lovely song. *I* made it—I!
It has not changed me. I'm the same small man,
And yet I made it! Strange!

[*A knock.*]

STAGE HAND

[*Putting in his head at the door.*]

You'll not see anyone, sir, will you?

SHAKESPEARE

I told you already I'll come to the green-room when the show's over. I can see no stranger before.

STAGE HAND

So I've told her, sir, many times. But she says you will know her when you see her and she can't wait.

SHAKESPEARE

A lady?

STAGE HAND

No, no, sir, just a woman. I'll tell her to go away again.

SHAKESPEARE

Wait! Did she give no name?

STAGE HAND

Name of Hathaway, sir, from Stratford.

SHAKESPEARE

Anne! Bring her here! Bring her here quickly, privately! You should have told me sooner. Where does she wait? Did any see her? Did any speak with her? If anyone asks for me save Henslowe or Mr. Marlowe, I am gone, I am not in the theatre. What are you staring at? What are you waiting for? Bring her here!

STAGE HAND

Glad to be rid of her, sir! She has sat in the passage this hour to be tripped over, and nothing budges her.

[*Calling.*]

Will you come this way—this way!

[*He disappears.*]

SHAKESPEARE

Anne? Anne in London? What does Anne in London?

STAGE HAND

[*Returning.*]

This way, this way,! It's a dark passage. This way!

[*Mrs. Hathaway comes in.*]

SHAKESPEARE

Not Anne!

MRS. HATHAWAY

Is Mr. Shakespeare—? Will! Is it Will? Oh, how you're changed!

SHAKESPEARE

Ten years change a young man.

MRS. HATHAWAY

But not an old woman. I'm Anne's mother still.

SHAKESPEARE

I'm not so changed that I forget it. What do you want of me, Mrs. Hathaway?

MRS. HATHAWAY

I bring you news.

SHAKESPEARE

Good news?

MRS. HATHAWAY

It's as you take it.

SHAKESPEARE

Dead?

MRS. HATHAWAY

Is that good news, my half son? She is not so blessed.

SHAKESPEARE

I did not say it so. Is she with you?

MRS. HATHAWAY

No.

SHAKESPEARE

Did she send you? Oh, so she has heard of this business! It's like her to send you now. She is to take her toll of it, is she?

MRS. HATHAWAY

You are bitter, you are bitter! You are the east wind of your own spring sunshine. She has heard nothing of this business or of that—dark lady.

SHAKESPEARE

Take care!

MRS. HATHAWAY

I saw her come from this room—off her guard. I know how a woman looks when a man has pleased her. Oh, please her if you must! I am old. I do not judge. And I think you will not always. But that's not my news.

SHAKESPEARE

I can't hear it now. I am pressed. This is not every night. I'll see you to-morrow, not now.

MRS. HATHAWAY

My news may be dead to-morrow.

SHAKESPEARE

So much the better. I needn't hear it.

MRS. HATHAWAY

Son, son, son! You don't know what you say.

SHAKESPEARE

That is not my name. And I know well what I say. You are my wife's mother and I'll not share anything of hers. But if she needs money, I'll send it. To-night makes me a rich man.

MRS. HATHAWAY

Richer than you think—and to-morrow poorer, if you do not listen to me.

[*There is a roar of applause.*]

SHAKESPEARE

Listen to you? Why should I listen to you? Can you give me anything to better that?

MRS. HATHAWAY

But if she can? Sixty years I have learned lessons in the world; but I never learned that a city was better than green fields, friends better than a house-mate, or the works of a man's hand more to him than the child of his own flesh.

SHAKESPEARE

And have I learned it, I? Do I not know
That when I left her I left all behind
That was my right? See how I live my life—
Married nor single, neither bond nor free,
My future mortgaged for a roofless home!

For though I love I must not say "I love you,
Come to my hearth!" A child? I have no child:
I hear no voice crying to me o' nights
Out of the frost-bound dark. How can it cry
Or smile at me until I give it lips?
How can it clutch me till I give it hands?
How can it be, until I give it leave?
Small sparrow at the window-pane, a'cold,
Begging your crumb of life from me, indeed
I cannot let you in. Small love, small sweet,
Look not so trustfully! You are not mine,
Not mine, not anyone's. Away, unborn!
Back to the womb of dreams, and never stir,
Never again! How meek the small ghost fades,
Reject and fatherless, that might have been
My son!

MRS. HATHAWAY

Is it possible? Anne knew you best.
She said you did not know. Dear son, too soon
By two last months yet by these months too late
After you left her, Hamnet, the boy, was born.

SHAKESPEARE

It is not true!

MRS. HATHAWAY

Ah, ah, she knew you best.
She said always, weeping she said always
You would not listen, though she sent you word;
But when the boy was grown she'd send the boy,
Then you would listen and come home, come home
But now that web is tattered in its turn
By a cold wind, an out-of-season wind,

Tearing the silver webs, blacking the leaves
And shaking the first blossoms down too soon,
Too soon, too soon. He shivered and lay down
Among pinched violets and the wrack of spring;
But when the sky drew breath and April came,
Amnog pinched violets and the wrack of spring;
New flowers from the ground, still our flower drooped:
The sunlight hurt his eyes, his bed's too hot,
He drinks and will not eat: since Saturday
There's but one end.

SHAKESPEARE

What end?

MRS. HATHAWAY

You're stubborn as she.
She will not bow to it. Yet she sent me hither
To bring you home.

SHAKESPEARE

New witch-work

MRS. HATHAWAY

Will you not come?

SHAKESPEARE

I will not.

MRS. HATHAWAY

Will you not come? She bade me say
That the boy cries for you—

SHAKESPEARE

A lie! A gross lie!
He never called me father.

MRS. HATHAWAY

That he does!
You are his Merlin and his Arthur too,
And God-Almighty Sundays. Thus it goes—
"My Father says—" and "When my Father comes—"
"I'll tell my father!" To his mother's hand
He clings and whispers in his fever now,
With bright eyes wide—your eyes, son, your quick eyes—
That she shall fetch you (she? she cannot speak)
To bring him wonders home like Whittington,
(And where's your cat?) and tell the tales you know
Of Puck and witches, and the English kings,
To whistle down the birds as Orpheus did,
And for a silver penny pick the moon
From the sky's pocket, and buy him gingerbread—
And so he rambles on, breaking her heart
A second time, God help her!

SHAKESPEARE

I will come.

A MAN'S VOICE

[*Off the stage.*]

Shakespeare! Will Shakespeare! Call Will Shakespeare!

SHAKESPEARE

[*To Mrs. Hathaway.*]

Here!
When do we start?

MRS. HATHAWAY

The horses wait at the inn.

VOICE

Will Shakespeare!

SHAKESPEARE

Give me an hour. The bridge is nearer.
On London Bridge at midnight! I'll be there!

MRS. HATHAWAY

Not later, I warn you, if you'd see the child alive.

SHAKESPEARE

Fear not, I'll be there. D'you think so ill of me? I could have been a good father to my own son—if I had known. If I had known! This is a woman's way of enduring a wrong. Oh, dumb beast! Could she not send for me—send to me? Am I a monster that she could not come to me? "Buy him gingerbread"! To send me no word till he's dying! Would any she-devil in hell do so to a man? Dying? I tell you he shall live and not die. There was a man once fought death for a friend and held him. Can I not fight death for my own son? Can I not beat death off for an hour, for a little hour, till I have kissed my only son?

MARLOWE'S VOICE

Shakespeare! The Queen—the Queen has asked for you,
And sent her woman twice. Will Shakespeare! Will!

SHAKESPEARE

At midnight then.

[*Mrs. Hathaway goes out.*]

VOICE

Will Shakespeare!

SHAKESPEARE

Coming! Coming!

MARY

[*In the doorway, followed by Marlowe.*]

Is Shakespeare—?

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, not now, not now, not now!

MARY

Are you mad to keep her waiting? She has favours up her sleeve. You are to write her a play for the summer revels. Quick now, ere the last act begins! Off with you!

[*Shakespeare goes out.*]

Look how he drags away! What's come to the man to fling aside his luck?

MARLOWE

He has left it behind him.

MARY

Here's a proxy silver-tongue! Are you Mr. Marlowe?

MARLOWE

Are you Mistress Fitton?

MARY

So we've heard of each other!

MARLOWE

What have you heard of me?

MARY

That you were somebody's brother-in-art! What have you heard of me?

MARLOWE

That you were his sister-in-art.

MARY

A man's sister! I'd as soon be a cold pudding! What did he say of his sister, brother?

MARLOWE

That you brought him luck.

MARY

That he leaves behind him!

MARLOWE

Like the blind man's lucky sixpence that the Jew stole when he put a penny in his plate.

MARY

A Jew of Malta?

MARLOWE

What, do *you* read me? You?

A STAGE HAND

[*In the passage.*]

Last act, please! Last act! Last act!

MARY

I must go watch it.

MARLOWE

Don't you know it?

MARY

Oh, by heart! Yet I must sisterly watch it.

MARLOWE

Stay a little.

MARY

Till he comes? Then I shall miss all, for he'll keep me.

MARLOWE

Against your will?

MARY

No, with my Will.

MARLOWE

Is it he or his plays?

MARY

Not sure.

MARLOWE

If I were he I'd make you sure.

MARY

I wonder if you could! I wonder—how?

MARLOWE

Too long to tell you here, and—curtain's up!

MARY

Come to my house one lazy day and tell me!

MARLOWE

Hark! That's more noise than curtain!

HENSLOWE'S VOICE

Shakespeare! Shakespeare!

[*Entering.*]

Here's a calamity! Where's Shakespeare? He should be in the green-room! Why does he tuck away in this rat-hole when he's wanted? And what's to be done? Where in God's name is Shakespeare?

MARY

With the Queen.

MARLOWE

The curtain's up; he'll be here in a minute.

MARY

What's wrong?

HENSLOWE

Everything! Juliet! The clumsy beasts! They let him fall from the bier; they let him fall on his arm! Now he's moaning and wincing and swears he can't go on, though he has but to speak his death scene. I've bid them cut the afterwards.

MARLOWE

Broken?

HENSLOWE

I fear so.

MARY

Let it be broken! Say he must go on!
What? Spoil the play? These baby-men!

HENSLOWE

He will not.

MARLOWE

The understudy?

HENSLOWE

Playing Paris. Where's Shakespeare? What's to be done! The play's spoiled.

MARLOWE

He'll break his heart.

MARY

He shall not break his heart!
This is our play! Back to your Juliet-boy,
Strip off his wear and never heed his arm!
Bid them play on and bring me Juliet's robes!
I'll put them on and put on Juliet too.
Quick, Henslowe!

HENSLOWE

What! a woman play on the stage?

MARY

Ay, when the men fail! Quick! I say I'll do it!

SHAKESPEARE

[*Entering.*]

Here still? You've heard?

MARY

[*On the threshold.*]

And heeded. Never stop me!
You shall have Juliet. You shall have your play.

[*She and Henslowe hurry out.*]

MARLOWE

There goes a man's master! But does she know the part?

SHAKESPEARE

She knows each line, she knows each word, she breathed them
Into my heart long ere I wrote them down.

MARLOWE

But to act! Can you trust her?

SHAKESPEARE

She? Go and watch! I need not.

MARLOWE

But is it in her? She's Julia not Juliet, not your young Juliet, not your June morning—or is she?

SHAKESPEARE

You talk! You talk! You talk! What do you know of her?

MARLOWE

Or you, old Will?

SHAKESPEARE

I dream her.

MARLOWE

Well, pleasant dreams!

SHAKESPEARE

No more. I'm black awake.

MARLOWE

What's wrong? Ill news?

SHAKESPEARE

From Stratford. Yes, yes, yes, Kit! And it must come now, just now, after ten dumb years!

MARLOWE

Stratford! Whew! I'd forgotten your nettle-bed. What does she want of you?

SHAKESPEARE

Hark! Mary's on.

MARLOWE

It's a voice like the drip of a honey-comb.

SHAKESPEARE

Can she play Juliet, man? Can she play Juliet?
I think she can. Kit?

MARLOWE

Ay?

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, is there peace
Anywhere, Kit, in any, any world?

MARLOWE

What is it, peace?

SHAKESPEARE

It passeth understanding.
They round the sermon off on Sunday with it,
Laugh in their sleeves and send us parching home.
This is a dew that dries ere Monday comes,
And oh, the heat of the seven days!

MARLOWE

I like it!
The smell of dust, the shouting, and the glare
Of crowded noon in cities, and such nights
As this night, crowning labour. What is—peace?

STAGE HAND

[*Entering.*]

Sir, sir, sir, will you come down, sir, says Mr. Hens-

lowe. The end's near and the house half mad. We've not seen a night like this since—since *your* night, sir! Your first night, sir, your roaring Tamburlaine night! Never anything like it and I've seen many. Will you come, sirs?

SHAKESPEARE

You go, Marlowe!

STAGE HAND

There's nothing to fear, sir! It runs like clockwork. The lady died well, sir! Lord, who'd think she was a woman! There, there, it breaks out. Listen to 'em! Come, sir, come, come!

MARLOWE

We'll come! We'll come!

[*The man goes out.*]

SHAKESPEARE

Not I! Oh, if you love me, Marlowe, swear I'm ill, gone away, dead, what you please, but keep them away! I can stand no more.

MARLOWE

It's as she said—mad—mad—to fling your luck away.

SHAKESPEARE

A frost has touched me, Marlowe, my fruit's black. Help me now! Go, go! Say I'm gone, as I shall be when I've seen Mary—

MARLOWE

A back stairs? Now I understand.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, stop your laughter! I'm to leave London in half an hour.

MARLOWE

Earnest? For long?

SHAKESPEARE

Little or long, what matter? I've missed the moment. Who has his moment twice?

MARLOWE

Shall you tell her why you go?

SHAKESPEARE

Mary? God forbid!

VOICE

Shakespeare! Call Shakespeare!

SHAKESPEARE

D'you hear them? Help me! Say I am gone! Oh, go, go!

MARLOWE

Well, if you wish it!

[*He goes out leaving the door ajar. As Shakespeare goes on speaking the murmurs and claps die away and the noises of the stage are heard, the shouts of the scene-shifters, directions being given, and so on. Finally there is silence.*]

SHAKESPEARE

Wish it? I wish it? Have you no more for me
Of comfort, Marlowe?
Oh, what a dumb and measureless gulf divides
Star from twin star, and friend from closest friend!

Women, they say, can bridge it when they will:
As seamen rope a ship with grappling irons
These spinners of strong cords invisible
Make fast and draw the drifting glory home
In the name of love. I know not. Better go!
I am not for this harbour—

[*There is a sound of hasty footsteps and Mary Fitton enters in Juliet's robes. She stands in the doorway, panting, exalted, with arms outstretched. The door swings to behind her, shutting out all sound.*]

MARY

Oh, I faced
The peacock of the world, the arch of eyes
That watched me love a god, the eyes, eyes, eyes,
That watched me die of love. Wake me again,
O soul that did inhabit me, O husband
Whose mind I uttered, to whose will I swayed,
Whose self of love I was! Wake me again
To die of love in earnest!

SHAKESPEARE

Mary! Mary!

MARY

I cannot ride this hurricane. I spin
Like a leaf in the air. Die down and let me lie
Close to the earth I am! O stir me not
With rosy breathings from the south, the south
Of sun and wine and peaks that flame to God
Suddenly in the dark! O wind, let be
And drive me not; for speech lies on my lips
Like a strange finger hushing back my soul
With words not mine, and thoughts not mine arise

Like marsh-flame dancing! As a leaf to a tree
Upblown, O wind that whirls me, I return.
Master and quickener, give me love indeed!

SHAKESPEARE

These are the hands I never held till now:
These are the lips I never felt on mine:
This is the hour I dreamed of, many an hour:
This is the spirit awake. God in your sky!
Did your heart beat so on the seventh dawn?

MARY

'Ware thunder!

SHAKESPEARE

Sweet, He envies and is dumb,
Dumb as His dark. He was our audience.
Now to His blinding centrum home He hies,
Omnipotent drudge, to wind the clocks of Time
And tend His 'plaining universes all—
To us, to us, His empty theatre of night
Abandoning. But we too steal away;
For the play's done,
Lights out—all over—and here we stand alone,
Holding each other in a little room,
Like two souls in one grave. We are such lovers—

ANNE'S VOICE

As there's no room for in the human air
And green side of the grass—

SHAKESPEARE

A voice! A voice!

MARY

No voice here!

SHAKESPEARE

In my heart I heard it cry
Like a sick child waked suddenly at night.
[*Crying out.*]
A child—a sick child! Unlink your arms that hold me!

MARY

Never till I choose

SHAKESPEARE

Put back your hair! I am lost
Unless I lose all gain. O moonless night,
In your hot darkness I have lost my way!
But kiss me, summer, once! On London Bridge
At midnight—I'll be there! Has the clock struck?

MARY

Midnight long since.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, I am damned and lost
In hell for ever!

MARY

Food, dear fool, what harm?
If this be hell indeed, is not hell kind?
Is not hell lovely, if this love be hell?
Is not damnation sweet?

SHAKESPEARE

God does not know
How sweet, how sweet!

MARY

Were they not wise, those two
Whose same blood beats again in you and me,
That chose the desert and the fall and went
Exultant from their garden and their God?
Long shall the sworded angels stand at ease
And idly guard the undesired delight:
Long shall the grasses grow and tall the briars,
And bent the branches of the ancient trees:
And many a year the wilding flowers shall blaze
Under a lonely sun, and fruited sweets
Shall drop and rot, and feed the roots that feed,
And bud again and ripen: long and long
Silent the watchman-lark in heaven shall hang
High over Eden, e'er they come again
Those two, whose blood is our blood, and their love
Our love, our own, that no god gave us, ours,
The venture ours, the glory ours, the shame
A price worth paying, then, now, ever—

SHAKESPEARE

Eve,
Eve, Eve, the snake has been with you! You draw,
You drink my soul as I your body—

MARY

Kiss!

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ACT III

SCENE I

[Shakespeare's lodging. It is the plain but well-arranged room of a man of fair means and fine taste. The walls are panelled: on them hang a couple of unframed engravings, a painting, tapestry, and a map of the known world. There is a four-post bed with a coverlet and hangings of needlework, and on the window-sill a pot of early summer flowers. There is a chair or two of oak and a table littered with papers. Shakespeare is sitting at it, a manuscript in his hand. On the arm of the chair lolls Marlowe, one arm flung round Shakespeare's neck, reading over his shoulder.]

SHAKESPEARE

Man, how you've worked! A whole act to my ten lines! You dice all day and dance all night and yet—how do you do it?

MARLOWE

Like it?

SHAKESPEARE

Like it? What a word for a word-master! Consider, Kit! When the sun rises like a battle song over the sea: when the wind's feet visibly race along the tree-tops of a ten-mile wood: when they shout "Amen!" in the Abbey, praying for the Queen on Armada Day: when the sky is a brass gong and the rain steel rods, and across all suddenly arch the seven colours of the promise—do I *like* these wonders when I stammer and weep, and know that God lives? Like, Marlowe!

MARLOWE

Yes, yes, old Will! But do you like the new act?

SHAKESPEARE

I like it, Kit!

[They look at each other and laugh.]

MARLOWE

And now for your scene, ere I go.

SHAKESPEARE

My scene! I give you what I've done. Finish it alone, Kit, and take what it brings! I'm sucked dry.

MARLOWE

I've heard that before.

SHAKESPEARE

I wish I had never come to London.

MARLOWE

Henslowe's back. Seen him?

SHAKESPEARE

I've seen no-one. Did the tour go well?

MARLOWE

He says so. He left them at Stratford. Well, I must go.

SHAKESPEARE

Where? To Mary?

MARLOWE

Why should I go to your Mary?

SHAKESPEARE

Because I've asked you to, often enough. Why else? You've grown to be friends. You could help me if you would.

MARLOWE

Never step between a man and a woman!

SHAKESPEARE

But you're our friend! And they say you know women.

MARLOWE

They say many things. They say we're rivals, Will —that I shall end by having you hissed.

SHAKESPEARE

Let them say! But have you seen Mary? When did you last see Mary?

MARLOWE

I forget. Saturday.

SHAKESPEARE

Did you speak of me, Kit? Kit, does she speak of me?

MARLOWE

If you must have it—seldom. New songs, new books, new music—of plays and players and the Queen's tantrums—not of you.

SHAKESPEARE

I have not seen her three days.

MARLOWE

Why, go then and see her!

SHAKESPEARE

She has company. She is waiting on the Queen. She gives me a smile and a white cool finger-tip, and —"Farewell, Mr. Shakespeare!" Yet a month ago, ay

and less than a month—! Did you give her my message? What did she say?

MARLOWE

She laughed and says you dream. She never liked you better.

SHAKESPEARE

Did she say that?

MARLOWE

She says you cool to her, not she to you.

SHAKESPEARE

Did she say that?

MARLOWE

Swore it, with tears in her eyes.

SHAKESPEARE

Is it so? I wish it were so. Well, you're my good friend, Marlowe!

MARLOWE

Oh, leave that!

SHAKESPEARE

Kit, do you blame me so much?

MARLOWE

Why should I blame you?

SHAKESPEARE

That I'm here and not in Warwickshire.

MARLOWE

I throw no stones. Why? Have you heard aught?

SHAKESPEARE

No, nor dared ask—nor dared ask, Marlowe. The boy's dead. I know it. But I will not hear it. Marlowe, Marlowe, Marlowe, do you judge me?

MARLOWE

Ay, that putting your hand to the plough you look back. Would I comb out my conscience daily as a woman combs out her hair? I do what I choose, though it damn me! Blame you? The round world has not such another Mary—or so, had I your eyes, I should hold. For this prize, if I loved her, I would pay away all I had.

SHAKESPEARE

Honour, Kit?

MARLOWE

Honour, Will!

SHAKESPEARE

Faith and conscience and an only son?

MARLOWE

It's my own life. What are children to me?

SHAKESPEARE

Well, I have paid.

MARLOWE

But you grudge—you grudge! Look at you! If you go to her with those eyes it's little wonder that she tires of you.

SHAKESPEARE

Tires? Who says that she tires? Who says it?

MARLOWE

Not I, old Will! Not I! Why, Shakespeare?

SHAKESPEARE

[*Shaken.*]

I can't sleep, Kit! I can't write. What has come to me? I think I go mad.

[*He starts.*]

Was that the boy on the stairs? I sent him to her. I wrote. I have waited her will long enough. She shall see me to-night. I'll know what it means. She plays with me, Kit. Are you going?

MARLOWE

I shall scarce reach Deptford ere dark.

SHAKESPEARE

How long do you lodge in Deptford?

MARLOWE

All summer.

HENSLOWE

[*Pounding at the door.*]

Who's at home? Who's at home?

MARLOWE

That's Henslowe.

SHAKESPEARE

Why does the boy stay so long?

HENSLOWE

[*In the doorway.*]

Gentlemen, the traveller returns! For the last time, I tell you! My bones grow too old for barn-storming. Do you go as I come, Kit? Thank you for nothing!

MARLOWE

Be civil, Henslowe! "The Curtain's" on its knees to me for my next play.

HENSLOWE

Pooh! This man can serve my turn.

MARLOWE

You see, they'll make rivals of us, Will, before they've done. I'll see you soon again.

[*He goes out.*]

HENSLOWE

Well, what's the news?

SHAKESPEARE

I sit at home. You roam England. You can do the talking. How did the tour go?

HENSLOWE

You're thin, man! What's the matter? Success doesn't suit you?

SHAKESPEARE

How did the tour go?

HENSLOWE

By way of Oxford, Warwick, Kenilworth—

SHAKESPEARE

I said "how" not "where."

HENSLOWE

—and Leamington and Stratford. We played 'Romeo' every other night—and to full houses, my son! I've a pocketful of money for you. They liked you

everywhere. As for your townsfolk, they went mad. You can safely go home, boy! You'll find Sir Thomas in the front row, splitting his gloves. He'll ask you to dinner.

SHAKESPEARE

Were you there long?

HENSLOWE

Two nights.

SHAKESPEARE

Did you see—anyone?

HENSLOWE

Why not say—

SHAKESPEARE

I say, did you pass my house?

HENSLOWE

I had forgot the way.

SHAKESPEARE

As I have, Henslowe!

HENSLOWE

Should I have sought her?

SHAKESPEARE

No.

HENSLOWE

Yet I did see her.
Making for London, not a week ago,
Alone on horseback, sudden the long grey road
Grew friendly, like a stranger in a dream
Nodding "I know you!" and behold, a love

Long dead, that smiles and says, "I never died!"
Then in the turn of the lane I saw your thatch.
Summer not winter, else was all unchanged.
Still in the dream I left my horse to graze,
And let ten years slip from me at your gate.

SHAKESPEARE

Is it ten years?

HENSLOWE

The little garden lay
Enchanted in the Sunday sloth of noon;
In th' aspen tree the wind hung, fast asleep,
Yet the air danced a foot above the flowers
And gnats danced in it. I saw a poppy-head
Spilling great petals, noiseless, one by one:
I heard the honeysuckle breathe—sweet, sweet:
The briar was sweeter—a long hedge, pink-starred—

SHAKESPEARE

I know.

HENSLOWE

There was a bush of lavender.
And roses, and a bee in every rose,
Drowning the lark that fluted, fields away,
Up in the marvel blue.

SHAKESPEARE

Did you go in?

HENSLOWE

Why, scarce I dared, for as I latched the gate
The wind stirred drowsily, and "Hush!" it said,
And slept again; but all the garden waked
Upon the sound. I swear, as I play Prologue,

It watched me, waiting. Down the path I crept,
Tip-toe, and reached the window, and looked in.

SHAKESPEARE

You saw—?

HENSLOWE

I saw her; though the place was gloom
After the sunshine; but I saw her—

SHAKESPEARE

Changed?

HENSLOWE

I knew her.

SHAKESPEARE

Who was with her?

HENSLOWE

She was alone,
Beside the hearth unkindled, sitting alone.
A child's chair was beside her, but no child.
Her hands were sleepless, and beneath her breath
She tuned a thread of song—your song of 'Willow.'
But when I tapped upon the window-pane,
Oh, how she turned, and how leaped up! Her face
Glowed white as iron new lifted from the forge:
Her hair fled out behind her in one flame
As to the door she ran, with little cries
Scarce human, tearing at the bolt, the key,
And flung it crashing back: ran out, wide-armed,
Calling your name: then—saw me, and stood still,
So still you'd think she died there, standing up,
As a sapling will in frost, so desolate
She stood, with summer round her, staring—

SHAKESPEARE

Well?

HENSLOWE

I asked her, did she know me? Yes, she said,
And would I rest and eat? So much she said
To the lawn behind me—oh, to the hollyhock
Stiff at my elbow—to a something—nothing—
But not to me. I could not eat her food.
I told her so. She nodded. Oh, she knows
How thoughts run in a man. No fool, no fool!
I spoke of you. She listened.

SHAKESPEARE

Questioned you?

HENSLOWE

Never a question.

SHAKESPEARE

She said nothing?

HENSLOWE

Nothing.

SHAKESPEARE

Not like her.

HENSLOWE

But her eyes spoke, as I came
By way of London, Juliet, 'The Rose,'
And the Queen's great favour ("And why not?" they said)
Again to silence; so, as I turned to go
I asked her—"Any greeting?" Then she said,
Lifting her chin as if she sped her words
Far, far, like pigeons flung upon the air,
And soft her voice as bird-wings—then she said,

"Tell him the woods are green at Shottery,
Fuller of flowers than any wood in the world."
"What else?" said I. She said—"The wind still blows
Fresh between park and river. Tell him that!"
Said I—"No message, letter?" Then she said,
Twisting her hands—"Tell him the days are long.
Tell him—" and suddenly ceased. Then, with good-bye
Pleasantly spoken, and another look
At some wraith standing by me, not at me,
Went back into the house and shut the door.

SHAKESPEARE

Ay, shut the door, Henslowe; for had she been this she
Ten years ago and I this other I—
Well, I have friends to love! Heard Marlowe's news?
He's three-part through Leander! Oh, this Marlowe!
I mine for coal but he digs diamonds.

HENSLOWE

Yet fill your scuttle lest the world grow chill! Is the new play done?

SHAKESPEARE

No.

HENSLOWE

Much written?

SHAKESPEARE

Not a line.

HENSLOWE

Are you mad? We're contracted. What shall I say to the Queen?

SHAKESPEARE

What you please.

HENSLOWE

Are you well?

SHAKESPEARE

Well enough.

HENSLOWE

Ill enough, I think!

SHAKESPEARE

Write your own plays—bid Marlowe, any man
That writes as nettles grow or rain comes down!
I am not born to it. I write not so.
Romeo and Juliet—I am dead of them!
The pay's too small, good clappers! These ghosts need blood
To make 'em plump and lively and they know it,
And seek their altar. Threads and floating wisps
Of being, how they fasten like a cloud
Of gnats upon me, not to be shoo'd off
Unsatisfied—and they drink deep, drink deep;
For like a pelican these motes I feed,
And with old griefs' remembrance and old joys'
Sharper remembrance daily scourge myself,
And still they crowd to suck my scars and live.

HENSLOWE

Now, now, now—do I ask another 'Juliet' of you? God forbid! A fine play, your 'Juliet,' but—

SHAKESPEARE

Now come the "buts."

HENSLOWE

Man, we must live! Can we fill the theatre on love and longing, and high words? Ay, when Marlowe does it to the sound of trumpets. But you—you're not Marlowe. You know too much. Your gods are too much men and women. Who'll pay sixpence for a heartache? and in advance too! Give us but two more 'Romeo and Juliets' and you may be a great poet, but we close down. Another tragedy? No, no, no, we don't ask that of you! We want light stuff, easy stuff. Oh, who knows as well as you what's wanted? It's a court play, my man! The French Embassy's to be there and the two Counts from Italy, and always Essex and his gang, and you know *their* fancy. Get down to it now, there's a good lad! Oh, you can do it in your sleep! Lovers and lasses, and quarrels and kisses, like the two halves of a sandwich! But court lovers, you know, that talk verse—and between them a green cress of country folk and country song, daffodils and valentines, and brown bowls of ale—season all with a pepper of wit—and there's your sandwich, there's your play, as the Queen likes it, as we all like it!

SHAKESPEARE

Ay, as you like it! There's your title pat!
But I'll not serve you. I'm to live, not write.
Tell that to the Queen!

[*A boy enters whistling and stops as he sees Shakespeare.*]

Well, Hugh, what answer?

BOY

None, sir!

SHAKESPEARE

What? No answer?

HENSLOWE

See here, Will! If you do not write me this play you have thrice promised, I'll to the Queen—sick or mad I'll to the Queen this very day for your physic—and so I warn you.

SHAKESPEARE

[*To the boy.*]

Did you see—?

BOY

The maid, sir!

HENSLOWE

I'll not see "The Rose" in ruins for a mad—

SHAKESPEARE

[*To the boy.*]

But what did I bid you?

BOY

Wait on the doorstep till Mistress Fitton came out, though I waited all night. But indeed, sir, she's gone; for I saw her, though she did not see me.

HENSLOWE

Oh, the Fitton! Now I see light through the wood!

SHAKESPEARE

What's that you say?

HENSLOWE

I say that the Queen shall know where the blame lies.

SHAKESPEARE

You lie. *I* heard you. *I* saw you twist your lips round a white name.

HENSLOWE

Will! Will! Will!

SHAKESPEARE

Did you not?

HENSLOWE

Why, Will, you have friends, though you fray 'em to the parting of endurance.

SHAKESPEARE

What's this?

HENSLOWE

I say you have friends that see what they see, and are sorry.

SHAKESPEARE

Yes, I am blessed in one man and woman who do not use me as a beast to be milked dry. I have Marlowe and—

HENSLOWE

Marlowe? And I said, God forgive me, that you knew men and women! Marlowe!

SHAKESPEARE

You speak of my friend.

HENSLOWE

Ay, Jonathan—of David, the singer, of him that took Bathsheba, all men know how.

[*Shakespeare makes a threatening movement.*]

No, no, Will! I am too old a man to give and take with you—too old a man and too old a friend.

SHAKESPEARE

So you're to lie and I'm to listen because you're an old man!

HENSLOWE

Lie? Ask any in the town. I'm but a day returned and already I've heard the talk. Why, man, they make songs of it in the street!

SHAKESPEARE

It? It? It?

HENSLOWE

Boy?

BOY

Here, sir?

HENSLOWE

What was that song you whistled as you came up the stairs?

BOY

"Weathercock," sir?

HENSLOWE

That's it!

BOY

Lord, sir, I know but the one verse I heard a dray-man sing.

HENSLOWE

How does it go?

BOY

It goes—

[*Singing.*]

Two birds settle on a weathercock—
How's the wind to-day—O?
One shall nest and one shall knock—
How's the wind to-day—O?
Turn about and turn about,
Kit pops in as Will pops out!
Winds that whistle round the weathercock,
Who's her love to-day—O?

It's a good tune, sir!

HENSLOWE

Eh, Will? A good tune! A rousing tune!

SHAKESPEARE

[*Softly.*]

"For this prize, if I loved her, I would pay all I had! I do what I choose though it damn me!"

BOY

May I go, sir?

SHAKESPEARE

Go, go!

BOY

And my pay, sir? Indeed I'd have stopped the lady if I could. But she made as if she were not herself, and rode out of the yard. But I knew her, for all her riding-coat and breeches.

HENSLOWE

What's all this?

SHAKESPEARE

[*To the boy*].

You're dreaming—

BOY

No, sir, there was your ring on her finger—

SHAKESPEARE

Be still! Take this and forget your dreams!

[*He gives him money.*]

Henslowe, farewell! If you've lied to me I'll pay you for it, and if you've spoken truth to me I'll pay you for it no less.

HENSLOWE

Pay? I want no pay. I want the play that the Queen ordered, and will have in the end, mark that! You have not yet served the Queen.

SHAKESPEARE

Boy! Hugh!

BOY

Sir?

SHAKESPEARE

Which way did she ride?

BOY

Am I asleep or awake, sir?

SHAKESPEARE

Which way did she ride?

BOY

Across the bridge, sir, as I dreamt it along the Deptford road.

SHAKESPEARE

Marlowe! The Deptford road! The Deptford road!

[*He rushes out.*]

BOY

[*Showing his money.*]

Dreaming pays, sir! It's gold.

HENSLOWE

Boy, boy! Never trust a man! Never kiss a woman! Work all day and sleep all night! Love yourself and never ask God for the moon! So you may live to be old. This business grows beyond me. I'll to the Queen.

[*He trots out, shaking his head. The boy skips after him, whistling his tune.*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ACT III

SCENE II

[*A private room at an inn late at night. Through the door in the right wall is seen the outer public room, with men sitting drinking. There is a window at the back, set so low in the wall that, above the window-sill, the heads of summer flowers glisten in the moonlight. On the left wall is the hearth and between it and the window a low bed. In the centre is a table with candle, glasses and mugs, and two or three men sitting round it drinking. Marlowe stands with his back to the window, one foot on a chair, shouting out a song as the curtain rises.*]

MARLOWE

[*Singing.*]

If Luck and I should meet
I'll catch her to me crying,

'To trip with you were sweet,
Have done with your denying!'
Hey, lass! Ho, lass!
Heel and toe, lass!
Who'll have a dance with me?

ALL TOGETHER

Hey, Luck! Ho, Luck!
Ne'er say no, Luck!
I'll have a dance with thee!

A MAN

[*Hammering the table.*]

Again! Again!

LANDLORD

[*At the door.*]

Sir, sir, there's without a young gentleman hot with riding—

MARLOWE

Does the hot young gentleman give no name?

LANDLORD

Why yes, sir, Archer, Francis Archer! He said you would know him.

MARLOWE

I knew an Archer, but he died in Flanders.

LANDLORD

He may well come from Flanders, sir, for he's muddy.

MARLOWE

Are Flanders' graves so shallow? Tell him if he's alive I don't know him, and if he's dead I won't

know him, and so either way let him go where he belongs.

[*The Landlord goes out.*]

THE MAN

What, Kit! send him to hell with a dry throat?

MARLOWE

And all impostors with him!

THE MAN

But what if it were a true ghost? Have a heart! You'll be one yourself some day, and watch old friends run away from you when you come to haunt them in pure good fellowship.

LANDLORD

[*At the door.*]

Sir, he says indeed he knows you. His business is private.

MARLOWE

Well, let him come in. No, friends. sit still! If he's the death he pretends we'll face him together as the song teaches.

[*Singing.*]

When Death at last arrives,
I'll greet him with a chuckle,
I'll ask him how he thrives
And press his bony knuckle,
With—Ho, boy! Hey, boy!
Come this way, boy!
Who'll have a drink with me?

MARY'S VOICE

[*On the stairs.*]

Hey, Sir! Ho, Sir!
No, no, no, Sir!
Why should he drink with thee?

ALL TOGETHER

Hey, Death! Ho, Death!
Let me go, Death!
I'll never drink with thee!

MARLOWE

What voice is that?

[*Mary stands in the doorway. She is dressed as a boy, with cloak, riding boots, and slouch cap.*]

MARY

[*Singing.*]

If Love should pass me by,
I'll follow till I find him,
And when I hear him sigh,
I'll tear the veils that blind him.
Up, man! Dance, man!
Take your chance, man!
Who'll get a kiss from me?

ALL TOGETHER

Hey, Love! Ho, Love!
None shall know, Love!
Keep but a kiss for me!

[*They clap.*]

THE MAN

[*To Marlowe.*]

Ghost of a nightingale! D'you know him?

MARLOWE

I think I do.

[*To Mary, aside.*]

What April freak is this?

THE MAN

[*With a glass.*]

Spirits to spirit, young sir! Have a drink!

MARY

I should choke, sir! We drink nectar in my country.

THE MAN

Where's that, ghost?

MARY

Oh, somewhere on the soft side of heaven where the poppies grow.

THE MAN

He swore you were dead and buried.

MARY

And so I was. But there's a witch in London so sighs for him and so cries for him, that in the end she whistled me out of my gravity and sent me here to fetch him home to her.

THE MAN

Her name, transparency, her name?

MARY

Why, sir, I rode in such haste that my memory could not keep up with me. It'll not be here this half hour.

MARLOWE

Landlord, pour ale for a dozen, and these friends will drink to her, name or no name—in the next room.

THE MAN

Kit, you're a man of tact! I'm a man of tact. We're all men of tact!

Ho, boys! Hey, boys!
Come this way, boys!
Who'll have a drink with me?
[*The door closes on them.*]

MARY

Well, did you ever see a better boy? My hair was the only trouble.

MARLOWE

Madcap! What does this mean?

MARY

What I said!

[*Singnig.*]

Moth, where are you flown?
To burn in a flame!
Moth, I lie alone—
You've not been near me these four days.

MARLOWE

Uneasy days—I could not.

MARY

Are you burned, moth? Are the poor wings a frizzle?

MARLOWE

Not mine, dear candle, but a king of moths,
But a great hawk-moth, velvet as the night
He beats with twilight wings, he, he is singed,
Fallen to earth and pitiful.

MARY

Oh, Shakespeare!
My dear, I've run away because I hate
The smell of burning.
He was to come to me to-night to tell me his tragedies and his comedies and—oh, I yawn! And I played her so well too at the first—

MARLOWE

Who?

MARY

The cool nymph under Tiber stairs—what's her name?—Egeria. Am I your Egeria, Marlowe?

MARLOWE

Something less slippery.

MARY

Oh, she was fun to play—first to please the Queen and then to please myself. For I was caught, you know. It's something to be hung among the stars, something to say—"I was his Juliet!"

MARLOWE

What, you—you Comedy-Kate?

MARY

Why, I'm a woman! that is—fifty women!
While he played Romeo to my Juliet

I could be anything he chose. O Kit!
I sucked his great soul out. You never lit the blaze
I was for half an hour: then—out I went!

MARLOWE

He stoops o'er the embers yet.

MARY

But ashes fanned
Fly from their centre, lighter than a kiss,
And settle—where they please!

[*She kisses him.*]

D'you love me?

MARLOWE

More than I wish.

MARY

Would you be cured?

MARLOWE

Not possible.

MARY

[*Singing.*]

Go to church, sweetheart,
A flower in your coat!
Your wedding bells shall prove
The death of love! The death of love!
Ding-dong! Ding-dong!
The death of love!

Or so Will says.

MARLOWE

He should know.

MARY

What's that?

MARLOWE

Nothing.

MARY

He's married?

MARLOWE

I do not tell you so.

MARY

Married! He shall pay me. Married! I guessed it —but he shall pay me. A country girl?

MARLOWE

If you must know! He has not seen her these ten years. She sent for him the night of 'Juliet.'

MARY

Why now all's plain.
So she's the canker that hath drooped our rose!
If I had loved him—I do not love him, Marlowe—
This would have fanned a flame. Well, we're all cheats!
But now I cheat with better conscience. Married!
Lord, I could laugh! He must not know I know it.

MARLOWE

I shan't boast I told you. O Mary, when I first came to you, it was he sent me. He came like a child and asked me to see you, to say what good of him I could,
Because I was his friend. And now, see, see,
How I have friended him!

MARY

I love you for it.
He shall not know. Why talk of him? Forget him!

MARLOWE

Can you?

MARY

Why, that I cannot makes me mad—

MARLOWE

Forget him?
As soon forget myself! I am his courage,
His worldly wisdom—Mary, I think I am
The youth he lost in Stratford. Yet we're one age,
And now we write one play. If I died of a sudden,
It seems he'd breathe me as I left my body,
And I should live in him as sunshine lies
Forgotten in a forest, and be found
In slants and pools and patterns, golden still
In all he writes.

MARY

O dull Kit! have I adventured here to hear you talk of dying?

MARLOWE

You borrowed Archer's name.

MARY

I wanted one that would startle you out to me, and you told me the tale of him once, how young he died.

MARLOWE

And how unwilling! You've set him running in my head like a spider in a skull,
Spinning across the hollows of mine eyes
A web of dusty thought. Sweet, brush him off!
Death's a vile dreg in this intoxicant,

This liquor of the gods, this seven-hued life.
Sometimes I pinch myself, say—"Can you die?
Is it possible? Will you be winter-nipped
One day like other flies?" I'm glad you came.
Stay with me, stay, till the last minute of life!
Let the court go, the world go, stay with me!

MARY

[*Her arms around him.*]

So—quiet till the dawn comes, quiet! Hark!
Who called? Did you hear it?

MARLOWE

Birds in the ivy.

MARY

No.
Twice in the road I stopped and turned about
Because I heard my name called. There was nothing;
Yet I had heard it—Mary—Mary—Mary!

MARLOWE

You heard your own heart pound from riding.

MARY

Again!
Open the window!

[*Marlowe rises and goes to the window.*]

Do you see anything?

MARLOWE

All's sinister. The moon fled out of the sky
Long since, and the black trees of midnight quake.

MARY

And the wind! What a wind! It tugs at the window-frame
Like jealousy, mad to break in and part us.
Could you be jealous?

MARLOWE

If I were a fool
I'd let you guess it.

MARY

Wise, you're wise, but—jealous?
Too many men in the world! I'd lift no finger
To beckon back the fool that tired of me,
Would you? But he, he glooms and says no word,
But follows with his eyes when e'er I stir.
I hate those asking eyes. Look thus at me
But once and—ended, Marlowe! I'll not give
But when I choose.

[*He sits beside her.*]

MARLOWE

But when *I* choose.

[*Behind them the blur of the window is darkened.*]

MARY

[*In his arms.*]
Why yes!
Had he your key-word—! Sometimes I like him yet,
When anger comes in a white lightning flash,
Then he's the man of men still, then with shut eyes
I think him you and shiver and I like him,

Held roughly in his arms, thinking of you.
The Warwick burr is like an afterwards
Of thunder when he's angry, in his speech.

MARLOWE

What does he say?

MARY

He says he is not jealous!
He would not wrong me so, nor wrong himself.
Then the sky lightens and we kiss—or kiss not!
Who cares?
Then in come you. It's well he thinks you his
In friendship—

MARLOWE

So I was.

[*Shakespeare swings himself noiselessly over the sill.*]

MARY

And so you are,
And have all things in common as friends should.
Eh, friend?
Oh, stir not! Frowning? If you were a fool—
(How did it run?) you'd let me guess you—jealous!
But you're no fool.

MARLOWE

Let's have no more! You know
I loved—I love the man.

MARY

Why, so do I.

MARLOWE

You shall not!

MARY

Then I will not. Not to-night.

SHAKESPEARE

[*Standing by the window.*]

Why not to-night, my lover and my friend?

[*He comes down into the room as they start up.*]

Will you not give me wine and welcome me?
Sit down, sit down—we three have much to say!
But tell me first, what does that hand of yours
Upon her neck, as there were custom in it?
Part! Part, I say! Part! lest I couple you
Once and for all!

MARY

He's armed!

MARLOWE

He shall not touch you!

SHAKESPEARE

You, Marlowe! You!

MARLOWE

Stand out of her way!

SHAKESPEARE

You! You!

MARLOWE

Why then—

[*Marlowe darts at Shakespeare and is thrown off. He staggers against the table, knocking over the candle. As he strikes the second time his arm is knocked up, striking his own forehead. He falls across the bed. There is an instant's pause, then Shakespeare rushes to him, slipping an arm under his shoulder.*]

MARY

Dead? Is he dead? Oh, what an end!
I never saw a dead man. Will—to me!

SHAKESPEARE

Get help!

MARY

I dare not.

MARLOWE

Oh!

SHAKESPEARE

What is it?

MARLOWE

Oh!
My life, my lovely life, and cast away
Untasted, wasted—
Death, let me go!

[*He dies.*]

MARY

What now? Rouse up! Delay
Is dangerous. Wake! Wake! What shall we do?

SHAKESPEARE

O trumpet of the angels lent to a boy,
Could I not spare you for the golden blast,
For the great sound's sake? What have I done?

ANNE'S VOICE

Ah! Done
The thing you would not do—

MARY

Rouse! Rouse yourself!
What now?

ANNE'S VOICE

Remember—

SHAKESPEARE

Hark! A sigh!

MARY

The wind
Keening the night—

SHAKESPEARE

A sound of weeping—

MARY

Rain.
Is this a time for visions? White-cheeked day
Stares through the pane. Each minute is an eye
Opening upon us. What shall we do now?

SHAKESPEARE

Weep, clamorous harlot! We have given him death,
And shall we dock his rights of death, his peace
Upon his bed, his sun of hair smoothed, hands
Crossed decently by me, his friend? Close you
His eyes with kisses, lest I kill you too!
Give him his due, I say! his woman's tears!
You were his woman—oh, deny it not!
You were his woman. Pay him what you owe!

MARY

What? Do you glove my clean hand with your stain,
Red fingers? Soft! This is your kill, not mine!
My free soul is not sticky with your sins.
You pinch your lips? *You* singe me with your tongue?
Your country lilac that you left for me
Taught you strange names for a woman. Harlot? I?

Sweep your own stable, trickster, married man!
Lie, cheat, break faith, until you end a man
That bettered you as roses better weeds—

SHAKESPEARE

That is well known.

MARY

—and now you'll stare and weep
Until the watch comes and the Queen hears all.
Then—ends all!
And I caught with you! She's a devil of ice
Since Leicester died. No man or woman stirs her;
But she must have her toys! London's her doll's house,
Its marts, its theatres. This death was half her pride,
And you the other. Was I not set to mould you?
What will she do to me now her doll's broken,
Broken in my hand? I fear her, oh, I fear her,
The green eyes of her justice and her smile.
Will, if you love me—you who have had my lips,
And more, and more, and shall have all again,
All that you choose, and gladly given—awake!
Fly while there's time to save yourself and me!
Look not on him—he's blind—he cannot speak,
Nor a stretch a hand to stay you—he's cold nothing!
But we, we live! Here on my throat, here, here,
(Give me your fingers!) feel the hot pulse live!
Yet I'll die sooner than be pent. You know me!
Must I lie still for ever at his side
Because you will not rouse yourself?

SHAKESPEARE

Who speaks?
O vanished dew, O summer sweetness gone,
O perfume staled in a night, that yesterday
Was fresh as morning roses—do you live?
Are you still Mary? O my shining lamp
Of love put out, how dark the world has grown!
Did you want him so? Did it come on you suddenly,
And shake you from your north—

MARY

The dawn! the dawn!

SHAKESPEARE

Or did you never love me—where do you point?

MARY

To save ourselves comes first!

SHAKESPEARE

To answer me!

MARY

Fool! Fool! Will you hang? Let go, fool!

SHAKESPEARE

Answer me!

MARY

Will, for the love of living—

SHAKESPEARE

Answer me!

MARY

I never loved you. Are you answered?

ANNE'S VOICE

Oh—
For a month—in the spring—

SHAKESPEARE

Is it a month ago?
The trees are not yet metalled with the dust
Of summer, that were greening when we two—

MARY

Oh, peace!

SHAKESPEARE

—in a night of spring—

MARY

Ah, was it love?

SHAKESPEARE

Remember, Beauty, when you came to me,
As came the beggar to Cophetua,
As queens came conquered to the Macedon,
As Cressid came by night to Diomed,
As night comes queenly to the bed of day
Enmantled in her hair, so you to me,
Juliet and all your night of hair was mine
To curtain me and you—

MARY

Forgotten, forgotten—

SHAKESPEARE

That night you loved me—

ANNE'S VOICE

I was drunk with dreams
That night.

SHAKESPEARE

That night of victory you loved me!
I have my witnesses. O watching stars—

MARY

The eyes, the eyes, the arch of eyes!

SHAKESPEARE

—speak for me!
Once was a taper that outshone you all,
It burned so bright. Oh, how you winked and pried!
I saw you through the tatters of the dark
And mocked you in my hour. Yet speak for me,
Eternal lights, for now my candle's blown
Past envy! But she loved me then!

MARY

I know not.

SHAKESPEARE

Though god and devil deny—you loved me then!

MARY

But was it love?
I could have loved if you had taught me loving.
Something I sought and found not; so I turned
From searching. I have clean forgotten now
That ever I sought—and so live merrily—
And so will live! Why wreck myself for you?

SHAKESPEARE

O heart's desire, and eyes' desire of hands,
Self of myself, have pity!

MARY

What had you?
If I had borne you children (but I was wise,
Knowing my man, as men have taught me men)
What name had you to give them, to give me?
No, no, I wrong you, for you christened me
But now, first having slain him who had struck
The rankness from your mouth.

SHAKESPEARE

What I have done—

MARY

Lied, lied to me!

SHAKESPEARE

—and if I did—

ANNE'S VOICE

To hold you!
I couldn't lose you. I was mad with pain.

MARY

Tricked me—

SHAKESPEARE

To hold—listen to me—to hold you!
Lest I should lose you. I was mad with pain.

MARY

Are you so womanish that a breath of pain—

SHAKESPEARE

A breath! God, listen! A breath, a summer breath!

MARY

—could blow away your honour?

SHAKESPEARE

Once it was mine.
I laid it up with you. Where is it now?
I'm stripped of honour like an oak in June
Whose leaves a curse of caterpillars eat,
That stands a mockery to flowers and men,
With naked arms praying the lightning down.

ANNE'S VOICE

At Shottery the woods are green—

SHAKESPEARE

My God!

ANNE'S VOICE

And full of flowers—

SHAKESPEARE

Let be, let be! My honour?
I bought it with a woman—not like you,
A faithless-faithful woman—not like you;
But weak as I'm weak, loving as I love,
God help her! not like you—no black-eyed Spain
Whose cheeks hang out their red to match the red
When bull meets man—no luxury that wears
A lover like new clothes, and all the while
Eyes other women's fashions; but a woman
That should have loved me less, poor fool, and less—

MARY

You should have loved me less, my fool, and less!

SHAKESPEARE

Yet from this folly all the music springs
That is in the world, and all my hopes that ranged

Lark-high in heaven! Yet murder comes of it.
Look where he lies! He was true friend to me,
And I to him, until you came, you came.

MARY

I came and I can go.

SHAKESPEARE

Mary!

[*There is a clatter of hoofs.*]

MARY

D'you hear?
Horses! What do they seek? You, Marlowe, me?

SHAKESPEARE

This they call conscience.

MARY

Take your hand away!
I'll slip through yet; nor shall you follow me;
You had your chance. Listen! A boy was here;
One Francis Archer. Say it after me—
No woman, but a boy, a stranger to you!

SHAKESPEARE

Strange to me, Mary.

[*There is a sound of voices in the yard.*]

MARY

If you hold me now
I'll scream and swear you stabbed him as he slept,
They're drinking still.

[*She opens the door.*]

VOICES

[In the outer room.]

Hey, boy! Ho, boy!
Heel and toe, boy!
Who'll have a drink with me?

MARY

If you should get away.
Send me no message, come not near me! Now!

[She slips into the room. Shakespeare stands at the half open door watching.]

A MAN

Sing another verse!

ANOTHER

There's the boy back. Make him sing it!

MARY

I'm to fetch more wine first.

THE MAN

Sing another verse!

ANOTHER

If Love and I should meet,
I'll catch her to me—

ANOTHER

Luck, you fool, not love!

ANOTHER

Where's the difference? If you're in love you're in luck.

ANOTHER

Here, stop the boy!

MARY

Let me pass, gentlemen!

THE MAN

Sing another verse!

ANOTHER

If Love and I—

ANOTHER

Shut up now and let the kid sing it!

MARY

Why yes, if you'll let me pass afterwards, sir, like love in the song.

THE MAN

Sing another verse! Sing twenty other verses!

MARY

[*Singing.*]

If Love should pass me by,
I'll follow till I find him,
And when I hear him cry,
I'll tear the veils that blind him!

THE MAN

Now then, chorus!

ALL TOGETHER

Hey, Love! Ho, Love!
None shall know, Love!
Keep but a kiss for me!

[*Mary disappears in the crowd. The door swings to as Shakespeare turns back into the room.*]

SHAKESPEARE

Marlowe! Marlowe!
She is gone, Marlowe, that was a fume of wine
Between us. Marlowe, Marlowe, speak to me!
Never a sound. We have seen many a dawn
Creep like a house-wife on the drunken night,
And tumble him from heaven with work day hand
And bird-shrill railing; but such a waking up
As this we never knew. Sorry and cold
I look on you. Kit, Kit, this mark of the knife
Is the first blot I ever saw in you,
The first ill-writing. Kit, for your own sake,
You should have wronged a stranger, not your friend;
For like a looking glass my heart still served you
To see yourself, and when you struck at me,
You struck yourself, and broke this mirror too.

[*A knock.*]

Mary? Is it Mary? Lie you quiet, Marlowe!
We will not let her in.

HENSLOWE

Within, who's within there?

SHAKESPEARE

Two dead men.

HENSLOWE

Is it Marlowe?
Is Shakespeare there?

SHAKESPEARE

Come in, come in, come in!

[*Henslowe comes in hurriedly. He leaves the door half open behind him.*]

VOICES

[*Singing.*]

Ho, boy! Hey, boy!
Come this way, boy!
Who'll have a drink with me?

HENSLOWE

Why, here's a bird of wisdom sitting in the dark! Shut your eyes, man, and use candles or you'll scorch out your own sockets! What's wrong now? But tell me that as we ride; for the Queen wants you in a hurry, and what's more an angry Queen. I'd not be you! Here I've hunted London for you from tavern to lady's lodging till I ferreted out that Marlowe was here, and so I followed him for news.

SHAKESPEARE

Here's news enough. Henslowe, look here!

HENSLOWE

Who did it?

SHAKESPEARE

We—he and I. There was another in it.

HENSLOWE

Was it the youngster passed me in the yard,
Caught at his horse and rode like fear away?

SHAKESPEARE

Was't a pale horse?

HENSLOWE

I saw not. In the dark
A voice cried "Hurry!"

SHAKESPEARE

That was she.

HENSLOWE

Who? Who?

SHAKESPEARE

Death. She has fled and left her catch behind.
Can you do anything?

HENSLOWE

For the living scarce—
You must be got away. Are you known here?
As men know Cain. All, all is finished, Henslowe!

LANDLORD

[*Putting his head in at the door.*]

Is anything wrong sir?

HENSLOWE

Wrong? What should be wrong? But we're in haste. Call the ostler! We want a second horse.

[*He slips his arm through Shakespeare's and tries to lead him to the door.*]

LANDLORD

Is the gentleman ill, sir? He sways.

HENSLOWE

Your good wine, host.

A MAN

[*Over the Landlord's shoulder.*]

The best on the Surrey side!

HENSLOWE

He'll tell the Queen so in an hour if you'll make way.

MEN

[*Crowding into the doorway.*]

The Queen! Did you hear? He's been sent by the Queen!

HENSLOWE

Keep your people back, landlord!

THE MAN

[*Staggering into the room.*]

I say, three cheers for the Queen!

ANOTHER

The Queen! The Queen! Three cheers for Bess!

[*Singing.*]

Hey, Bess! Ho, Bess!
Heel and toe, Bess!

Ladies and gentlemen, here's a man on the bed.

HENSLOWE

Ay! My friend! Let him be!

THE MAN

Is he drunk too?

THE OTHER

If I were a judge I'd say "Very drunk"! He's spilled his wine on his clothes. What I say is "Waste not, want not!"

LANDLORD

Come now, come away! You hear what the gentleman says.

THE MAN

[*Throwing him off.*]

Hey, Death! Ho, Death!
Let me go, Death!
Shall I wake him?

SHAKESPEARE

[*Turning in the doorway.*]

Ay, wake him, wake him, old trump of judgment! Wake him if you can,
And if you cannot let him sleep his sleep
And envy him that he can sleep so sound!

THE MAN

Ay sir, he shall sleep till he wakes. But we, sir, we'll sing you off the premises, for the love of Bess.
Hey, Bess? Ho, Bess!

ANOTHER

[*Hammering the table.*]

Death, not Bess! Death! Death! Death! Come along chorus!

TWO OR THREE

[*As they lurch out of the room.*]

Ho, boy! Hey, boy!
Come this way, boy!
Who'll have a drink with me?

ALL

[*Following.*]

Hey, Death! Ho, Death!
Out you go, Death!
We'll never drink with thee!

[*The door swings to and quiet settles on the lightening room. The first ray of sunlight touches the bed. Outside the birds are beginning to sing.*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ACT IV

[*A room in the palace, hung with tapestries. On the right wall is a heavy, studded door: on the left, a great raised seat on a low platform. On the back wall is a small curtained door and a large window. A girl in a primrose-coloured gown stands at it holding back its curtain. Set slantwise in front of it, nearer the centre of the stage, is a writing table with scattered papers. At it sits Elizabeth, a secretary beside her. The Queen's dress is of dull grey brocade with transparent lawn and jewels of aquamarine; but as the evening deepens its colour becomes one with the dusk and only her white face and hands are clearly seen.*]

A HAWKER

[*Chanting in the street far away.*]

Cress! Buy cress!
Who'll buy my cress-es?

[*Elizabeth lays down her pen.*]

ELIZABETH

These three are signed. Take them to Walsingham. This I'll not grant. Tell him so!

[*The man bows and goes out.*]

HAWKER

[*Nearer.*]

Cress! Buy cress!

ELIZABETH

There! Put the papers by!

[*The girl at the window comes down to the table and begins to sort them.*]

ANOTHER HAWKER

Strawberries! Ripe strawberries!

THE GIRL

I wonder, Madam, that you choose this room
Here on the noisy street.

ELIZABETH

Child, when you marry
Who'll rule your nursery, you or your maids?

GIRL

Why, that I will!

ELIZABETH

Then you must sit in it daily. Where's Mary Fitton?

GIRL

In waiting, Madam, and half asleep. She was up early to-day. I saw her from my window by the little garden door and called to her. She had been out to pick roses, as you bade her, ere the dew dried on them.

ELIZABETH

As I bade her?

GIRL

Yes, Madam, she said so.

HAWKER

[*Close at hand.*]

Cress! Buy cress!
Fit for Queen Bess!

ELIZABETH

Open the window!

[*The girl opens it.*]

HAWKER

Cress! Buy cress!
Who'll buy my cress-es?

ELIZABETH

Fetch me my purse!

[*The girl goes out by the little door. As she does so, Elizabeth takes her purse from a drawer and going to the window, throws out a coin.*]

HAWKER

Cress! Buy cress!
Are you there, lady?

[*Elizabeth throws out another coin.*]

I plucked my riches
From Deptford ditches,
I came by a Deptford Inn;
Where a young man lies,
With pennies on his eyes—
Murdered, lady, and none saw who did it!
Cress! Buy cress!

[*Elizabeth flings out another coin.*]

There was a boy that ran away, and Henslowe the Queen's man, and a third—
Cress! Buy cress!
A supper for Queen Bess!

[*Elizabeth lays down the purse on the table as the girl comes back.*]

GIRL

[*Distressed.*]

Madam—

ELIZABETH

It was here. That cress seller has a sweet voice. Fling her a coin and ask her where she lives!

GIRL

[*Going to the window.*]

Hey, beggar!

HAWKER

Bless you, lady!

GIRL

Where do you come from with your green stuff?

HAWKER

Marlow, lady, Marlow!
Down by the river where the cresses grow,
And buttercups like guineas.
Cress! Buy cress!
Who'll buy my cress-es?
[*Her voice dies away in the distance.*]

GIRL

She has come a long way.
Marlow's across the river, far from us.

ELIZABETH

Marlowe's across the river, far from us.
If any ask to speak with me, let me know it!

GIRL

Why, Madam, Henslowe, the old player, has been waiting since noon, and Mr. Shakespeare with him.

ELIZABETH

The name's not written here. Whose duty?

GIRL

Mary Fitton's.

ELIZABETH

Send Henslowe! And when I ring let Mary Fitton answer!

GIRL

I'll tell her, Madam.

[*She goes out. Elizabeth rises and goes slowly across the room to the dais and seats herself. There is a pause. Then a page throws open the big door facing the dais and Henslowe enters.*]

ELIZABETH

Henslowe, you're not welcome
For the news you bring.

HENSLOWE

Madam, that Marlowe's dead
I know because I found him—I am new come from Deptford—
But how you know I know not.

ELIZABETH

Why, not a keel
Grounds on the Cornish pebbles, but the jar
Thrills through all English earth home to my feet.
No riderless horse snuffs blood and gallops home
To a girl widowed, but I the sparking hoofs
Hear pound as her heart pounds, waiting; for my spies
Are everywhere. Do not my English swifts
Report to me at dusk, eavesdropping low,
The number of my English primroses

In English woods all spring? The gulls on Thames
Scream past the Tower "Storm in Channel! Storm!"
And if I hear not, sudden my drinking glass
Rings out "Send help, lest English sailors drown!"
The lantern moon swings o'er unvisited towns
Signalling "Peace!" or a star shoots out of the west
Across my window, flashing "Danger here!"
And is it Ireland rising, or a child
On chalk-pit roof after the blackberries,
I'm warned, and bid my human servants haste.
The flat-worn stones, the echoes of the streets
At night when drunkards tumble, citizens
In the half silence and half light trot home,
Reveal the well, the ill in my own land.
I am its eyes, its pulse, its finger-tips,
The wakeful partner of its married soul.
I know what darkness does, what dawn discovers
In all the English country. I am the Queen.
You have done my errand? Shakespeare the player is with you?

HENSLOWE

He waits without.

ELIZABETH

Then he too was at Deptford last night.

HENSLOWE

None knows it.

ELIZABETH

That's well! But was it he, Henslowe—he?

HENSLOWE

No, no, no! I'll swear it.

ELIZABETH

But will he swear it?

HENSLOWE

He's dazed, he will say anything—yes—no—
Just as you prompt him, as if one blow had struck
His soul and Marlowe's body. Madam, he's not his witness!
Yet, if 'twere true, if he has lost us Marlowe,
Must we lose him? Then has the English stage
Lost both her hands and cannot feed herself,
Starves, Madam!

ELIZABETH

You're honest, Henslowe! Your son's son one day
May help a king to thread a needle's eye.
But do you think he did it?

HENSLOWE

No, though he says it,
For he loved him.

ELIZABETH

Loved him, but a woman better.

HENSLOWE

There was no woman with them.

ELIZABETH

So I hear; but a boy!

HENSLOWE

Unknown.

ELIZABETH

Did you see him?

HENSLOWE

Not his face. He was past me in a flash, crying "Hurry!"

ELIZABETH

Well, I'll see Shakespeare.

HENSLOWE

Madam—

ELIZABETH

I thread my own needles, Henslowe, being a woman.

[*Mary Fitton enters.*]

Send Mr. Shakespeare to me!

[*Then, as Mary turns to go—*]

Mary!

MARY

Madam?

ELIZABETH

Bid him hurry!

[*Mary turns to the door.*]

Mary!

MARY

Madam?

ELIZABETH

What did I tell you but now?

MARY

Madam, to bid him hurry.

HENSLOWE

[*Recognising the voice.*]

"Hurry!"

ELIZABETH

Wait. Daylight, Henslowe? Girl, you're slow. You go heavily. Have you not slept? Let Henslowe do your errand!

[*To Henslowe.*]

Let him wait at hand!

MARY

Madam, I can well go.

ELIZABETH

No hurry now.

[*Henslowe goes out.*]

D'you guess why I send for your teller of tales?

MARY

No, Madam.

ELIZABETH

He has told a tale, it seems, that I'd hear told again.

MARY

Told?

ELIZABETH

Why are you not in black, Mary?

MARY

I, Madam?

ELIZABETH

Marlowe is dead.

MARY

I grieve to hear it.

ELIZABETH

When did you hear?

MARY

Why, Madam, now—you tell me!

ELIZABETH

Then I tell you wrong. He is alive and has told all.

MARY

Alive? They lie to you, Madam! What has he
told? Who says it?

ELIZABETH

You, Mary Fitton! For by your dark-ringed eyes
Your dreaming service and those blind hands of yours
Seeking a hold, I think you saw him die,
Ere you passed Henslowe in the dark, crying "Hurry!"

MARY

Madam, it was your errand. For this Shakespeare,
This quill you thrust on me to sharpen up,
Jealous of Marlowe, though he had no cause
(What! must I live his nun, his stay-at-home?
Your servant and a lady of the court!),
Sent me a letter—

ELIZABETH

Let me read!

MARY

I tore it!
—so inked in threat that I post-haste for Deptford—

ELIZABETH

Ill judged!

MARY

I know! I followed my first fear.
—rode to warn Marlowe. Shakespeare following,
Spying upon us, spying upon us, Madam!
Found us in counsel. Then, with a hail of words
That Marlowe would not bear, with "stale" and
"harlot,"

He beat me down, till Marlowe flung 'em back;
Then like two dogs they struggled. Marlowe fell.

ELIZABETH

Struck down?

MARY

Struck down, but blindly, not to kill—
I will not think to kill—and as he fell
His own knife caught him, here.

ELIZABETH

What did you then?

MARY

I, Madam?

ELIZABETH

You, Madam? Did you fold your hands
And watch this business as you'd watch a play,
And clap them on? Or, as a short month since
You played a part I think, did you strike in
And play a part? Why did you call for help?

MARY

I did not, Madam!

ELIZABETH

Why did not Mary Fitton
Cry help against—which lover?

MARY

Lover, Madam?

ELIZABETH

There's tinker, tailor, soldier—the old rhyme—
There's Pembroke, Marlowe, Shakespeare—

MARY

Madam! Madam!
I'll not bear this!

ELIZABETH

Ay, you have fierce black eyes—
What will you do then if you will not bear it?
You have leave to show.

MARY

I say I did cry out
To both that they should cease.

ELIZABETH

So you cried out!
Bring up your witnesses that heard you cry!

MARY

I did not stand and watch. I ran upon them.
I was flung off and bruised.

ELIZABETH

Show me the bruise!

MARY

High on my arm—

ELIZABETH

Rip up your sleeve and show me!
You stand, you stare, you're white. I think you shake.

MARY

Anger not fear, though you were ten times Queen
Of twenty Englands!

ELIZABETH

Quiet, and quiet, my girl!
This ill-spent night has left you feverish.
You are too free for court,

Too bruised and touzled for my gentlemen.
You shall go home, I think, to heal this bruise,
To cleanse your body and soul in country air
And banished quiet till I send for you.

MARY

Upon what count?

ELIZABETH

On none. But I've no time,
No room for butter-fingers. Here's a man slain
Upon your lap that England needed. Go!
Go, blunted tool!

[*She touches a bell.*]

MARY

Madam! Madam! You wrong me!

ELIZABETH

I've wronged your betters, Mary, Mary Fitton,
As tide wrongs pebble, or as wind wrongs chaff
At threshing time.

[*A page enters at the great door on the right.*]

Send Mr. Shakespeare to me!

MARY

This is the justice of the Queen of England!

ELIZABETH

My justice.

MARY

Have I not served you?

ELIZABETH

All things serve me.
They choose their path. I use them in their path.

MARY

As once you used, they say—

ELIZABETH

Do not dare! Do not dare!

MARY

Dare, Madam? May I not wonder, like another.
Why you have used me thus?

ELIZABETH

I used you, dirt,
To show a man how foul the dirt can be;
But now I brush you from him.

[*The main door opens and Henslowe enters followed by Shakespeare. She beckons to Henslowe.*]

Henslowe!

HENSLOWE

Madam?

[*They speak privately for a moment, then Henslowe goes out by the small door.*]

MARY

[*To Shakespeare.*]

You come to cue!

SHAKESPEARE

What has fallen?

MARY

Sent away
Because of you, because my name is Mary!

SHAKESPEARE

Go to my lodging! Wait for me! I'll follow,
For where you go I go.

MARY

Ay, bring your wife!
This act is over! There are other men!

[*She goes out.*]

SHAKESPEARE

Mary! Love, life, the breath I breathe, come back!
Mary, you have not heard me! Mary! Mary
Come back!

[*The door shuts with a clang.*]

ANNE'S VOICE

Come back!

ELIZABETH

Never in any world!
Fasten the door there!

SHAKESPEARE

[*Struggling to open it.*]

Open! Open, I say!
Beat, beat your heart out! Let me watch you beat
Those servants of your soul until they bleed,
Mash, agonise, against a senseless door!
Beat, beat your weaker hands than that dead tree,
Tear, tear your nails upon its nails in vain.
Beat, beat your heart out—you'll not pass the door!
Can you not come at her? She goes—beat, beat!
The distance widens, like a ship she goes
Utterly from you. Follow! Beat your hands!
What? Are you held, you who bow men with words
Windily down like corn-fields? Is she gone?
Call up the clouds to carry you who walk

Sky-high, star-level, eyeing the naked sun.
Where are your wings? Beat, beat your heart out!
Beat!
Where is your strength? Will not the wood be moved?
Cannot your love-call reach her, you who know
The heart of the lark and how the warm throat thrills
At mating-time? Is there a living thing
You do not dwell in, cannot stir, and yet
You cannot move this door?

SHAKESPEARE

I am not so bound—

ELIZABETH

Why, yes, there's the window! You may cast down and be done with it all—done with it all! I'll not stop you. Who am I to keep a man from his sweet rest? And yet—what of me, my son, before you do it? What of me and this England that I am?

SHAKESPEARE

Madam, I have not slept these five nights. I do not know what you say.

ELIZABETH

Or care?

SHAKESPEARE

Or care, Madam, forgive me! God's pity, Madam, open the door!

ELIZABETH

It shall not serve you.

SHAKESPEARE

I know it.

ELIZABETH

She has sold you, man.

SHAKESPEARE

I know it. Open the door!

ELIZABETH

Come here, my son! Why do I hold you here, think you?

SHAKESPEARE

Marlowe—

ELIZABETH

Tell me nothing! I'll know nothing! Mr. Shakespeare, where is the work I should have from you? Where is the new play? You sold and I bought. Give me my goods! Then go!

SHAKESPEARE

A play? You are Queen, Madam, you do not live our lives; so I call you not pure devilish to keep me here for so little a thing.

ELIZABETH

Yet I will have it from you! There's paper, pen—
I'll have your roughed-out scene ere Henslowe leaves
To-night. And ere the ended month this play,
This English laughter, ringing all her bells,
Before the pick of Europe at my court
Performed, shall link our hands with Italy,
With old immortal Athens. This you'll do,
For this you can.

SHAKESPEARE

[*Crying out.*]

I am to live, not write,
To love, not write of love, to live my life
As others do, to live a summer life
As all the others do!

ELIZABETH

I thought so too
When I was young. Then, 'mid my state affairs
And droning voices of my ministers,
The people's acclamation and the hiss
Of treacheries to England and to me,
Ever I heard the momentary clock
Ticking away my girlhood as I reigned;
While she—while she—
Mary of Scotland, Mary of delight,
(I know her sweetheart names, Maybird, Mayflower,
The three times married honeysuckle queen,
She had her youth. Think you I'd not have changed,
Sat out her twenty years a prisoner,
Ridden her road from France to Fotheringay,
To have her story? Am I less woman, I,
That I'd not change with her? For the high way
Is flowerless, and thin the mountain air
And rends the lungs that breathe it; and the light
Spreading from hill to everlasting hill,
Welling across the sky as from a wound,
A heart of blood between the breasts of the world,
Is not much nearer, no, nor half as warm
As the kissing sun of the valleys: and we climb
(You'll climb as I do) not because we will,

Because we must. There is no virtue in it;
But some pride. Fate can force but not befool me!
I am not drunken with religious dream
Like the poor blissful fools of kingdom come:
I know the flesh is sweetest, when all's said,
And summer's heyday and the love of men:
I know well what I lose. I'm head of the Church
And stoop my neck on Sunday—to what Christ?
The God of little children? I have none.
The God of love? What love has come to me?
The God upon His ass? I am not meek,
Nor is he meek, the stallion that I ride,
The great white horse of England. I'll not bow
To the gentle Jesus of the women, I—
But to the man who hung 'twixt earth and heaven
Six mortals hours, and knew the end (as strength
And custom was) three days away, yet ruled
His soul and body so, that when the sponge
Blessed his cracked lips with promise of relief
And quick oblivion, he would not drink:
He turned his head away and would not drink:
Spat out the anodyne and would not drink.
This was a god for king and queens of pride,
And him I follow.

SHAKESPEARE

Whither?

ELIZABETH

The alley's blind.
For the cross rules us or we rule the cross,
Yet the cross wins in the end.
For night is older than the daylight is:

The slack string will not quiver for the hand
Of cunningest musician.
Does the cross care, a chafer on a pin,
Whether Barabbas writhe, or very God?
All's one to the dead wood! Dead wood, dead wood,
It coffins us in the end. God, you and me
And everyone—the dead wood baffles all.
And why I care I know not, but I know
That I'll die fighting—and the fight goes on.
Yet not uncaptained shall the assault go on
Against dead wood fencing the hearts of men.
For this I chose you.
I am a barren woman. Mary's child
Reigns after me in England. Yet, tonight,
I crown my heir. I England, crown my son.

SHAKESPEARE

There was a better man but yesterday—
To him the crown! King was he of all song.

ELIZABETH

He's king now of the silence after song,
When the last bell-note hovers, like a high
And starry rocket that dissolves in stars,
Lost ere they reach us. He is lord of that
For ever.

SHAKESPEARE

He—he had the luck; but I,
But England was not lucky.

ELIZABETH

Be assured
Had England chosen Marlowe, here to-night
England had crowned him, and you in Surrey ditch

Had lain where he lies, dead, my dead son, dead.
Take you the kingship on you!

SHAKESPEARE

A player king—

ELIZABETH

As I a player-queen! I play my part
Not ill, not ill. Judge me, my English peer,
And witness for me, that I play not ill
My part! And if by night, unseen, I weep,
Scourging my spirit down the track of the years,
Hating the name of Mary, as she said;
Yet comes and goes my hour, and comes again,
My hour, when I bear England in my breast
As God Almighty bears His universe,
England moves in me, I for England speak,
As I speak now. It is not the shut door,
But I, but England, holds you prisoner.

SHAKESPEARE

But to what service, England, and what end?

ELIZABETH

I send my ships where never ships have sailed,
To break the barriers and make wide the ways
For the after world.
Send you your ships to the hidden lands of the soul,
To break the barriers and make plain the ways
Between man and man. Why else were we two born?

SHAKESPEARE

What's the worth of a play?

ELIZABETH

My ships are not so great
And ride not like firm islands of dry land
As Philip's do; yet these my cockle-boats
Have used the vast world as a village pound,
And fished for treasure above the planets' bed
In the drowned palaces where, water-bleached,
Atlantis gleams as gleams the skull-white moon,
Rolled in the overwhelming tides of time
Hither and down the beaches of the sky.
Send out your thoughts as I send out my men,
To earn a world for England!—paying first
The toll of the pioneer. I do not cheat.
Here is the bill—reckon it ere you pay!

SHAKESPEARE

Have I not paid?

ELIZABETH

Nay, hourly, till you die.
I tell you, you shall toss upon your bed
Crying "Let me sleep!" as men cry "Let me live!"
And sleeping you shall still cry "Mary! Mary!"
This will not pass. Think not the sun that wakes
The birds in England and the daisy-lawns,
Draws up the meadow fog like prayer to heaven,
And curls the smoke in cottage chimney stacks,
Shall once forget to wake you with a warm
And kissing breath! The four walls shall repeat
The name upon your lips, and in your heart
The name, the one name, like a knife shall turn.
These are your dawns. *I* tell you, I who know.
Nor shall day spare you. All your prospering years,

The tasteless honours for yourself—not her—
The envy in men's voices, (if they knew
The beggar that they envied!) all this shall stab,
Stab, stab, and stab again. And little things
Shall hurt you so: stray words in books you read,
And jests of strangers never meant to hurt you:
The lovers in the shadow of your fence,
Their faces hid, shall thrust a spare hand out,
The other held, to stab you as you pass:
And oh, the cry of children when they play!
You shall put grief in irons and lock it up,
And at the door set laughter for a guard,
Yet dance through life on knives and never rest,
While England knows you for a lucky man.
These are your days. I tell you, I, a queen,
Ruling myself and half a world. I know
What fate is laid upon you. Carry it!
Or, if you choose, flinch, weaken, and fall down,
Lie flat and howl, and let the ones that love you
(Not burdened less) half carry it and you!
Will you do that? Proud man, will you do that?

SHAKESPEARE

Because you are all woman—

ELIZABETH

Have you seen it?
None other sees.

SHAKESPEARE

—and not as you're the Queen,
I'll let you be the tongue to my own soul,
Yet not for long I'll bear it.

ELIZABETH

To each his angel
For good or ill.
Women to a man, the man to a woman ever
Mated or fated. I am this fate to you,
As to me once a fallen star you knew not.
It's long ago. You should have known the man.
He was the glory of the English night,
Its red star in decline. For see what came—
His fires were earthy and he choked himself
In his own ash. Not good but goodly was he,
A natural prince of the world: and he had been one
Had he been other, or I blind, or—Mary.
Lucifer! Lucifer! He loved me not,
But would have used me. Well—he used me not.
He died. I loved him. This between us two.
Bury it deep!

SHAKESPEARE

Deep as my sorrow lies.
But Queen, what cometh after?

ELIZABETH

Work.

SHAKESPEARE

And after?

ELIZABETH

Sleep comes for me.

SHAKESPEARE

And after?

ELIZABETH

Sleep for you.

SHAKESPEARE

And after?

ELIZABETH

Nothing. Only the blessed sleep.

SHAKESPEARE

And so ends all?

ELIZABETH

And so all ends.

SHAKESPEARE

Love ends?

ELIZABETH

And so love ends.

SHAKESPEARE

I have a word to say.
Give me this crown and reach the sceptre here!
The end's not yet, but yet the end is mine;
For I know what I am and what I do
At last! Give me my pen, ere the spark dies
That lights me! And now leave me!

[*He turns to the table and his work.*]

ELIZABETH

[*Loudly.*]

Open the door!

SHAKESPEARE

Sesame, sesame! A word to say—

[*The door is flung open and the long passage is seen.*]

O darkness, did she pass between your walls,
And left no picture on the empty air,
No echo of her step that waits for mine
To wake it in a message? What do I here?
"A word to say"! There's nothing left but words.

[*Elizabeth has descended from her throne and crossing the room, pauses a moment beside him.*]

ELIZABETH

Is the harness heavy—heavy?

SHAKESPEARE

Heavy as lead.
Heavy as a heart.

ELIZABETH

It will not lighten.

SHAKESPEARE

Go!

[*She goes out.*]

I had a word to say.
Oh, spark that burned but now—!

ANNE'S VOICE

It dips, it dies—

SHAKESPEARE

A night-light, fool, and not a star. I grope
Giddily in the dark. I shall grow old.
What is my sum? I have made seven plays,
Two poems and some sonnets. I have friends
So long as I write poems, sonnets, plays.
Earn then your loves, and as you like it—write!
Come, what's your will?
Three sets of lovers and a duke or two,
Courtiers and fool—We'll set it in a wood,
Half park, half orchard, like the woods at home.
See the house rustle, pit gape, boxes thrill,
As through the trees, boyishly, hand on hip,
Knee-deep in grass, zone-deep in margarets,
Comes to us—Mary!

ANNE'S VOICE

Under the apple-trees,
In the spring, in the long grass—Will!

SHAKESPEARE

Still the old shame
Hangs round my neck with withered arms and chokes
Endeavour.

ANNE'S VOICE

Will!

SHAKESPEARE

At right wing enter ghost!
It should be Marlowe with his parted mouth
And sweep of arm. Why should he wake for me?
That would be friendship, and what a friend was I!
Well—to the work!

ANNE'S VOICE

Will! Will!

SHAKESPEARE

What, ghost? still there?
Must I speak first? That's manners with the dead;
But this haunt lives—at Stratford, by the river.
Maggot, come out of my brain! Girl! Echo! Wraith!
You've had free lodging, like a rat, too long.
I need my room. Come, show yourself and go!
"Changed?" "But I knew her!"—Say your say and go!
You'd a tongue once.

ANNE'S VOICE

You're to be great—

SHAKESPEARE

Stale! Stale!
That's the Queen's catch-word.

ANNE'S VOICE

But I know, I know,
I'm your poor village woman, but I know
What you must learn and learn, and shriek to God
To spare you learning—

SHAKESPEARE

Ay, like wheels that shriek,
Carting the grain, their dragged unwilling way
Over the stones, uphill, at even, thus,
Shrieking, I learn—

ANNE'S VOICE

When harvest comes—

SHAKESPEARE

Is come!
Sown, sprouted, scythed and garnered—

ANNE'S VOICE

I alone
Can give you comfort, for you reap my pain,
As I your loss—loss—loss—

SHAKESPEARE

Anne, was it thus?

ANNE'S VOICE

No other way—

SHAKESPEARE

Such pain?

ANNE'S VOICE

Such pain, such pain!

SHAKESPEARE

I did not know. O tortured thing, remember,
I did not know—I did not know! Forgive—

ANNE'S VOICE

Forgiving is forgetting—no, come back!
I love you. Oh, come back to me, come back!

SHAKESPEARE

I cannot.

ANNE'S VOICE

Oh, come back! I love you so.

SHAKESPEARE

Be still, poor voice, be still!

ANNE'S VOICE

I love you so.

SHAKESPEARE

What is this love?
What is this awful spirit and unknown,
That mates the suns and gives a bird his tune?
What is this stirring at the roots of the world?
What is this secret child that leaps in the womb
Of life? What is this wind, whence does it blow,
And why? And falls upon us like the flame
Of Pentecost, haphazard. What is this dire
And holy ghost that will not let us two
For no prayers' sake nor good deeds' sake nor pain
Nor pity, have peace, and live at ease, and die
As the leaves die?

ANNE'S VOICE

I know not. All I know,
Is that I love you.

SHAKESPEARE

But I know, having learned—
This I believe because I know, I know,
Being in hell, paying the price, alone,
Licked in the flame unspeakable and torn
By devils, as in the old tales that are true—
All true, the fires, the red hot branding irons,
The thirst, the laughter, and the filth of shame,
All true, O fellow men! all true, all true—
Down through the circles, like a mangled rat
A hawk lets fall from the far towers of the sky,
Down through the wakeful æons of the night,
Into the Pit of misery they call
Bottomless, falling—I believe and know
That the Pit's bottom is the lap of God,
And God is love.

ANNE'S VOICE

Is love, is love—

SHAKESPEARE

I know.
And knowing I will live my dark days out
And wait for His own evening to give light.
And though I may not fill the mouth I love,
Yet will I sow and reap and bind my sheaves,
Glean, garner, mill my corn, and bake, and cast
My bread upon the waters of the age.
This will I do for love's sake, lest God's eyes,
That are the Judgment, ask her man of her

One day, and she be shamed—as I am shamed
Ever, in my heart, by a voice witnessing
Against me that I knew not love.

PAGE

[*Entering with lights.*]

The Queen, sir;
Has sent you candles, now the sun is down,
That you may see to work.

SHAKESPEARE

I thank the Queen.
Tell her the work goes well!

[*He sits down at the table.*]

Act one, scene one,
Oliver's house. It *shall* go well. I have
A strength that comes I know not whence. It *shall*
Go well. And then I'll give the Roman tale
I heard at school—a tale of men, not women:
That easies all. But Antony goes on
To Egypt and a gipsy: leaves his pale wife
At home to scald her eyes out. Mary—Mary—
Will you not let me be? It *shall* go well.
And after Antony some Twelfth Night trick
To please our gods and give my pregnancy
Its needed peace. How many months for Denmark?
And then? A whole man laughs, and so will I.
Oh, Smile behind the thunder, teach me laughter,
And save my soul!—
The knock-about fat man, try him again!
He'll take a month or less—candles are cheap,
Cheaper than sleep these dreaming nights. That done,

I'll sink another shaft in Holinshed—
Marlowe, your diamonds! your diamonds!
The king and his three daughters—he's been shaped
Already. True! But rough cut only. Wait!
Give me that giant cluster in my hand
To cut anew, in its own midnight set,
It shall outshine Orion! Afterwards,
A fairy tale maybe, and after that—
And after that—and after—after? God!
The years before me! And no Mary! Mary—

ANNE'S VOICE

When her lost face—

SHAKESPEARE

It shall, it shall go well.

ANNE'S VOICE

—stares from the page you toil upon, thus, thus,
In a glass of tears—

SHAKESPEARE

They scald, they blind my view,
No comfort anywhere.

ANNE'S VOICE

I love you so.

SHAKESPEARE

The work, the work remains.

ANNE'S VOICE

But when you're old,
For work too old, or pity, love or hate,

For anything but peace, and in your hand
Lies the crowned life victorious at last—

SHAKESPEARE

Like the crowned Indian fruit, the voyage home
Rots while it gilds, not worth the tasting—

ANNE'S VOICE

Then,
Remember me! Then, then, when all your need
Is hands to serve you and a breast to die on,
Come back to me!

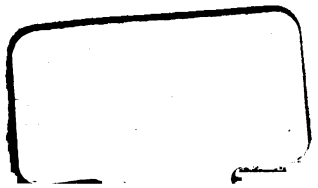
SHAKESPEARE

God knows—some day?

ANNE'S VOICE

I wait.

[*As he stoops over his work again*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

January, 1920—*April*, 1921.